Fiction

UNIVERSAL MAN/ 2. The Chinook Assembly

Consider joining in some of the 300 events of one of the largest folk life festivals in North America, happening here in beautiful Portland, Oregon. The annual 4-day Northwest Folkfest has been running strong on Memorial Day weekend for 29 years. The Folkfest promotes the vitality and preservation of the rich cultural heritage of the Pacific Northwest through dance and music, cooking demonstrations, youth activities, films, panel discussions, traditional and contemporary artwork, and storytelling representative of the distinct ethnic cultures and communities of our region. The 2017 festival's theme, **Truth in Beauty**, celebrates the shared elements within the aesthetic expressions of the different communities and groups that participate in the festival. Many of the venues are outside. Admission to all events is free.

The Chinook Assembly, host of Northwest Folkfest, sponsors more than 20 weekend cultural events throughout the year. Northwest Folkfest is produced with the generous support of Colovista Bank, Verity Wireless, KPBU 88.7 Public Radio, and Western Oregon Solarian Dealers. Additional support is provided by the Oregon Center Foundation and the City of Portland.

-from the Chinook Assembly's website

A bereaved young man becomes an uncatchable assassin. A mysterious group "arrests" abortion doctors to put them on trial. The corrupt government in power struggles to maintain control.

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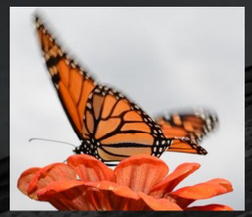

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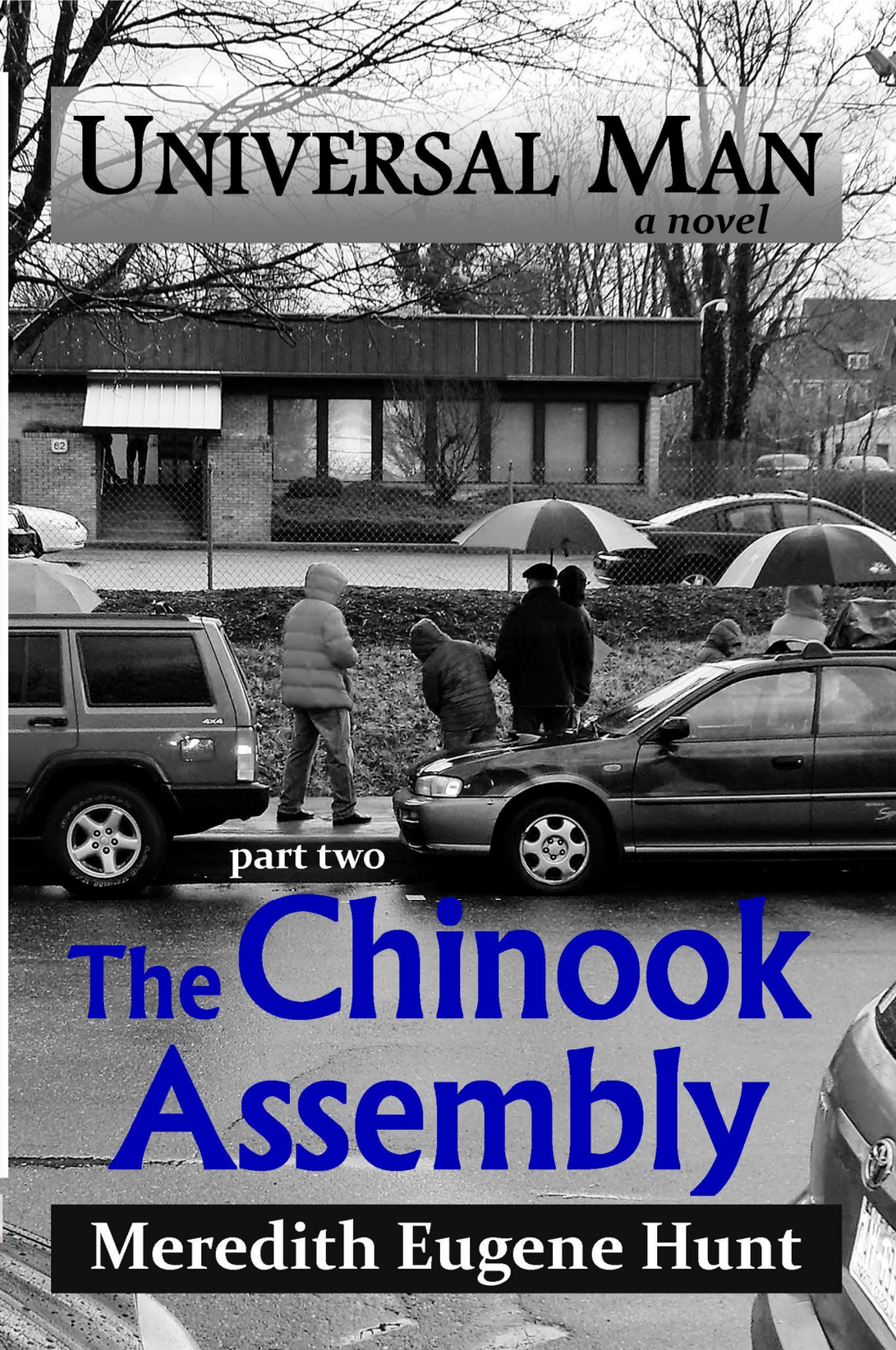
UNIVERSAL MAN

a novel



part two

The Chinook Assembly

Meredith Eugene Hunt

UNIVERSAL MAN

A novel in three volumes

Part Two

The Chinook Assembly

Meredith Eugene Hunt

Chaotic Terrain Press
Asheville

Chaotic Terrain Press
230 Jones Cove Road
Asheville, North Carolina 28805
anaktuvuk@earthlink.net
www.chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com

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This is a work of fiction.

Cover photo taken at 62 Orange Street in Asheville, NC,
an address then and for many years the site of human abortion.
All photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

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"If you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by the things that go with good judgment. He is not hampered by a sense of humour or by charity, or by the dumb certainties of experience. He is the more logical for losing certain sane affections. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is that man who has lost everything except his reason."

–G.K. Chesterton, ***Orthodoxy***

A synopsis of part one, *Graceful Runner*

A girl on horseback jumps a log on the Mollicoat Estate in NW Oregon. She is Mindy Sterne, 20 years old, and the Mollicoat estate is her family's property. (A section of the Estate is leased by the Chinook Assembly, a retreat center.) After the horse bucks Mindy off and bolts, Beth Telford, a college freshman who plays soccer and runs cross country, recovers the horse. Mindy and Beth become friends as a result of this encounter.

Tommy Duckwitz, a drama major in college, and Stanley Timmons, a first-year high school English teacher, also are friends. Late one night after a football game, Stan and Tommy aggressively confront Talus Schenk because Schenk date-raped Stan's sister, Sarah. She is pregnant as a result of the rape.

The following January, Tommy and Beth both win parts in the University's upcoming spring production of *Macbeth*. He is Macduff and she, Lady Macduff. The senior Talus Schenk is given the part of the corrupted war hero, Macbeth.

One night Tommy and Beth attend an Oregon Symphony concert where Tommy and an obnoxious, insulting concert patron get into an argument. The other person pulls a knife, stabs Tommy in the leg, and runs away leaving the knife behind. The wound requires stitches. The knife bears an inscription to a Dr. Mark Ponder. Tommy and Beth have devised a scheme to introduce Stan to Mindy, and this takes place on their way to visit Sarah Timmons at the Steilacoom state hospital, at which time the lonely bachelor Stan falls in love with Mindy. At Mindy's invitation, Sarah leaves the hospital to move in with her at the Sterne family residence in Vancouver, Washington. Stan works up the courage to ask Mindy for a date, but she turns him down, saying that she doesn't ever date. Even so, Stan hopes that with Sarah living at the Sternes' house, this will provide chances for him to see Mindy in the future, and he is disappointed when it doesn't make much difference.

The Scottish Play plays, but the University closes the show prior to its final performance because shocking events have just

transpired in real life in Oregon that are too much like the story of the play: that is, the governor has been assassinated.

Talus Schenk and Mark Ponder, an abortion doctor for whom Schenk works part time, conspire to steal Stan's sister Sarah's baby to sell it for profit, but the plot fails because of a few simple factors they did not anticipate.

Late in the school term, Tommy's grandparents die in a hit-and-run accident at the Oregon coast and Tommy inherits their valuable farm east of Vancouver.

That next summer Beth works as a counselor at a camp for handicapped people. During the first week of camp, Gene, a young man who was paralyzed by polio, learns to love Beth and proposes marriage to her. She ignores the proposal, which she feels is ridiculous and inappropriate.

Theodore, another counselor at the camp, likes Beth and invites her to visit Gene with him one weekend at the nursing home where Gene lives, but Beth spends nearly every weekend with Tommy on the farm and becomes pregnant. She chooses to abort and Tommy reluctantly submits to this decision after a long discussion. Beth then enters Ponder's abortion clinic alone. After seeing a horrifying photo of an aborted baby that the pro-life people outside of the clinic show him, Tommy changes his mind and hopes to persuade Beth to let their baby live. But Talus Schenk, as Dr. Ponder's security guard, stubbornly refuses to let Tommy see her, and she doesn't answer her phone either. Angry, Tommy breaks a window of the abortion building, kicks Schenk in the stomach, and flees from the scene.

Mindy has been worrying about Beth. After the Friday night book discussion at the Sterne residence, Stan is surprised when Mindy asks him to go with her to the abortion place on Saturday morning so she can talk with Beth—to talk her out of abortion. Mindy believes that Beth's appointment is then. When Stan and Mindy arrive, they find that the place is cordoned off by police because of an anonymous bomb threat. Later that day, they climb the trail up Beacon Rock and Stan is happy that he finally gets to spend some time with Mindy. Back at home after the excursion, just after midnight, Stan gets an unexpected telephone call from Mindy, who is nearly hysterical with grief.

Beth is dead.

A dark and rainy night. I'm walking down a deserted street between thick forest and a row of low buildings. Dismal light from windows illuminates the street. Ahead, a friend appears, walking in my direction. He has his head down. Suddenly from an alley, a large swift shape bounds towards my friend. I draw a sword and run in front of the beast. I swing the sword at the leaping tiger. The sword cuts through its neck. I jump backwards, and at my feet the long body twists and thrashes. My friend collapses in the road behind me. I help him up. He walks away without a word of thanks. Only now do I feel afraid.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

An Anglo-Catholic church.

Chapter Eleven
The Tiger

It rained throughout the night and cleared up by dawn. Stan barely slept. He passed through the motions of a leisurely Sunday breakfast: toast with butter and raspberry jam, soft-boiled eggs, coffee. Usually he did not digest the Sunday paper until Monday, but he had glanced at the front page, and a banner headline screamed about the Saturday bomb scare at the abortion clinic. He quickly devoured the story. Afterwards, he dressed while looking out his bedroom window into the wet backyard. The noise from the nearby traffic did not penetrate this part of the house, and he listened to his alarm clock patiently ticking. His house was so lonesome; his time was his own, alone.

He walked to early church, as was his custom. Whenever the demand upon his consciousness relaxed, he felt nothing but shock that Beth Telford was gone forever. He had not known her well, but he knew her and she was no more. The bomb scare made it even stranger. Stan wondered how Mindy was handling the death this morning. Her phone call to him had been too brief. Able to speak cogently at first, Mindy seemed mechanical, but the next moment she seemed incapable of suppressing her grief. She felt guilty about not being able to dissuade Beth from aborting, and then the abortion had killed Beth. He and Mindy missed finding her Saturday morning because Beth had gone into the abortion clinic on Friday. She had been driven from there directly to a Portland hospital and was soon released to go home, but she was not well. Her mother took her to the emergency room Saturday afternoon and by then it was too late. She had lost blood, developed an intense infection, went into shock and died around midnight. After Mindy had related this on the phone, some noisy confusion transpired in the room behind her voice and she had hastily said, “I’ll call you later.”

Stan tried to concentrate upon the liturgy, but when he kneeled for prayer and put his head down on the back of the pew in front

of him, he fell asleep. It was impossible to attend to the worship service. Normally, the liturgy carried rich meanings, but today it only made a backdrop of dull sounds and colors. He scarcely noticed the reading of the Psalm, but he did awaken for the homily because it was attuned to his preoccupation. The Second Lesson from the Scripture was the passage in the Gospel of John describing the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Stan listened with open-mouthed amazement to Fr. Schmidt saying, "Many abortion opponents don't trust that Christ will raise fetuses back to life. Rather, they protest against God and the laws he established through the governing authorities. Martha and Mary, and others attending the wake of Lazarus, complained to Jesus that if he had been there earlier, Lazarus would not have died, and yet Jesus had a much better plan, which would bring him great glory; and so God has a plan for abortion, even as it troubles us deeply. The truth then, is that the criminals who set off the bomb yesterday are rebels against God himself. Those people who are bombers and shooters are at least as evil, and perhaps more evil, than the abortion doctor. Our calling is to proclaim the gospel, and to hope and pray for the doctor's conversion and the conversion of our nation. Only this way will abortion be made insignificant. As people know Christ in greater numbers, they'll turn away from abortion and it will disappear . . ."

Stan found the homily to be appalling because it was utterly disconnected from his experience. He kept thinking that if only he and Mindy had sought and found Beth on Friday, she might not have gone through with abortion. During all these months since he met her, maybe there was something he could have said or done for her to lead her away from the course that resulted in her death. And Tommy? Couldn't he, Stan, have steered Tommy away from the delirious uncommitted relationship that led to Beth becoming pregnant?

Where is *Tommy?* Stan resolved to call him as soon as church was over.

Fr. Schmidt plunged forward with his homily, heedless that someone he might have cared about—had he ever met her—did die yesterday, and at the hand of the abortion doctor, while the

bomb threat had hurt no one. And where did Schmidt get the idea that there was an actual bomb?

As the homily ended, Stan felt dissatisfied. During the balance of the service, he tried to discern the meaning of Holy Communion, which followed. The small chimes ringing up front brought him back to the spiritual elements. He went forward to the rail, and during the efficient bustling of the servers, he glanced to the carvings in the wood and the colored glass. His nose tingled with the thick, heady breath of the incense. Everything here pointed to Christ, even the tiny cross on the wafer. Stan noticed that the wine tasted better than ever before.

When the liturgy was over, he moved toward the door where Fr. Schmidt greeted departing parishioners. The man in front of Stan was upbraiding Schmidt. "I can't believe you spout such extremist anti-choice rhetoric," he was saying. Schmidt listened, smiled, and said nothing. The fellow walked off in a huff, and Stan decided he would be as kind as possible to make up for the other person's rudeness.

"Good morning, Fr. Schmidt. I appreciated the communion wine this morning. I've always thought we should use the best."

"Good morning, Stan. Thank you, but I don't believe your compliment is warranted. It was our ordinary wine."

"Oh, but I am sure—"

"Well, maybe Mrs. Ready performed a miracle."

Fr. Schmidt had finished with Stan, and Schmidt's gaze flew over Stan's shoulder, but Stan hurriedly said, "There's something about your homily."

Schmidt reached to the hand of the person behind Stan. "Fine, Stan; I'm in my office every Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Come see me."

Stan departed, reproaching himself about the silly wine comment. When he had walked a half block, he passed a homeless person begging for food from motorists. Stan tried to pass unnoticed, but the man looked directly at him and asked, "Your church?"

"Yes?"

"It's dead."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a chicken with its head cut off; just keeps running. Chickens have strong constitutions. God made them so."

Stan shrugged and hurried along. When he arrived home, he tried to call Tommy. The phone rang a dozen times, but there was no answer, and no voice-mail greeting volunteered to take a message. In the afternoon, Stan went to his parents' house northwest of Camas for the usual big dinner.

"Did you see the paper this morning, Dad?" Stan asked at the table. "About the bomb scare?"

"I did. An old debate."

"Remember Tommy? I've told you about him before. His girlfriend died from abortion complications last night. The doctor at the clinic killed her. He's an incompetent."

"Is that so?"

Beginning with the trip to Steilacoom, Stan narrated what he knew about Beth and Tommy and their relationship. His mother appeared not to be listening, and when Stan stopped talking, ending mid-sentence, his mother said, "That hospital was a nasty place. I'm so glad Sarah left there."

Stan gave up trying to discuss the death with his parents. Beth reminded them too much of their daughter, Sarah. This was a heartache for Stan, in particular because he believed that they did not accept Guthrie as a genuine grandson, but he dared not mention his worry to his parents. They would be deeply hurt at the suggestion, but he said, "Why don't you invite Sarah and the baby here for dinner next Sunday?"

Now it was his dad's turn to change the subject. He rolled his eyes up to the horizon of wall and ceiling, and audibly searched his memory for a fictional female character who seemed most to mirror Beth. He had done the same with Sarah when she was ill.

Stan said, "I think Tolstoy's Anna Karenina comes closest."

"How's that?" his dad asked.

"It's not a perfect parallel, but Anna's romantic passion led to her death."

"I see what you mean. Would it follow that lack of romantic passion leads to life?" Stan's father asked, grinning.

"Anna and her husband did not love each other," Stan said. "They could have, but didn't. The real story of Anna Karenina is the love between Kitty and Levin, the love leading to a settled

domestic life that delights in beauty. An agrarian life. Passion brings life into being, but it must be regulated or it kills."

"It sounds like your mother and me." Stan's father laughed. "We're very alive."

Stan often heard how his parents met. His dad had driven a delivery truck, and his interest in reading was a factor in why he married Stan's mom, whom he met at the library where she worked after college. Dad had stopped by the library every afternoon to scour the newspaper. He did not stop at reading newspapers, nor with books. He and Stan's mom began taking her dinner hour together, sitting outside on a bench or under cover when it rained, eating sandwiches or potato salad. She was still a librarian now, part time, at the local library branch.

"I was your age when your mother and I married."

Stan looked up from his plate. His parents worried that their son would never marry, and they took an immense interest in any connection he might have with a young woman. He began telling them about his Saturday with Mindy.

When he was finished, his mother said, "She sounds like a nice person, Stan."

"I think so, too."

"Don't be too shy," she said.

After the mid-day dinner, Stan's mother went out to putter about in her flower garden. His dad put a baseball game on the television, and Stan napped on the couch for several innings and then went outside to help his mother.

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He spent the evening quietly at his own house. Sarah called and said Beth's funeral would be Wednesday. She didn't have time to talk—the phone was needed—and Stan held on to his handset after she hung up, the line beeping and he wondering how he could see Mindy. At his kitchen table with a small lamp, Stan finished lesson plans, and because he was stressed, he stayed up and read in bed until about 1:00 a.m. before finally falling asleep with the light on. He woke up a few hours later to turn off the light and he chastised himself for not brushing his teeth.

In the morning, Stan awoke feeling surprisingly fresh, and he sketched a remembered dream into his journal. As he drove to

his school in Battle Ground, he felt hopeful, despite carrying an inner core of grief. It was going to be a dry, clear day and he looked forward to riding his bicycle when he got home after work. It was just the therapy he needed. When he arrived at school, he stopped by the office. In his mailbox were school announcements and a bright yellow sealed envelope with no writing on the outside, other than his name. He began to open it, but just then the principal, Mr. Cooper, stepped from his office.

"Oh, Mr. Timmons, have you got a minute?"

Stan entered the principal's private office and Mr. Cooper followed, closing the door.

"Have a seat," Cooper said. "I've been meaning to talk with you about Bernardo Armentrout, the student who left your class early on Friday. I recall that you had some success with Thomas . . . what was his name? Sherman. But he changed it, didn't he? Duckwitz. You had success with him last year and I want you to know that Bernardo Armentrout is on the edge of being expelled. He has committed numerous infractions since school began. Frankly, we have come to the end of our disciplinary procedures. I don't wish to lay a burden on you, but of all his teachers, you have the most chance of turning him around."

Stan sat unspeaking for a moment. He couldn't possibly take on a new commitment.

Mr. Cooper went to the door and opened it, but Stan did not get up. "Questions?" Cooper asked.

"Uh. What can you tell me about Armentrout?"

Cooper left the door open and walked back to his desk. He opened a file folder and read through quickly.

"Hmm. He's taking good courses. Tests well. High standardized scores. He's new this year. I think, yes, he's adopted. It explains the irregular juxtaposition of names. Bilingual. Spanish. His real father was a geologist. The boy works part time in the evenings, at Dairy Queen."

Mr. Cooper continued reading silently but did not say more.

Stan stood. "May I see the file?"

Cooper closed it. "Sorry, it's confidential."

Stan said, "Oh, really? Well, I'll see what I can do," and started for the door.

Mr. Cooper came around from behind his desk. "Oh, one more thing. He is at school today, I know because he came by the office early this morning."

The school day was going well. There was no incident from Bernardo Armentrout, who did his work, not even looking up. When the bell announced the end of class, Armentrout waited for Stan to dismiss everyone before he stood to leave. As he passed, Stan said, "Mr. Armentrout?"

The student stopped. "What can I do for you?"

"I wonder if you would like to meet with me sometime to talk? We could have coffee somewhere."

Armentrout, smiling as if Stan had just made a funny remark, said, "Um . . . maybe later. We'll see," and then he left.

During Stan's free period, right before the lunch hour, Stan ate a sandwich at his desk—he had two students coming for noon detention and he wanted to be available to talk. When finished eating, he took up the yellow envelope and opened it. He slid out a letter, and another rectangle—a thin card—fell on his desk. The letter was typed and said only: "Remember the early Saturday morning phone call and the request? Be at the bench in front of the Visitor's Center at the Fort Vancouver replica at 5:00 p.m. Today. – A Friend"

Stan's reaction was amazement and then fear. His first inclination was to give the note to the police and tell them about the warning not to go to the abortion clinic—it might be the person who had made the bomb threat. But then he thought about the hassle. All this might end up on television, and the publicity would make his teaching job harder. The police might ask why he had not told them about the call earlier, and this fear convinced him to wait awhile before calling. And now that he had decided not to phone immediately, he began to consider the other factors. Who could have known he had planned to go to the abortion clinic last Saturday? Only someone who knew Mindy. Could the phone call be related to the wrongful death of Tommy's girlfriend?

He concluded that he had to go meet this anonymous person. This settled, he again noticed the card that had fallen from the envelope. He picked it up and held it in his hand. The image was of shades of pink and red. At first he couldn't tell what it

depicted, but when he realized it was a dead baby, his mind shrieked. *It can't be! It can't be an aborted child.* He had never seen anything like this. He turned the photograph over to look at the back more closely. In small penciled letters at the bottom were the words: "Pandora Telford, September 21, 2013. Ten weeks old."

Stan's mind staggered. He was already in shock over one person's death and the hard blow of human mortality, and now he comprehended there had been two deaths, or was this only a bad joke? Who could have taken this photograph? He brought the picture to the window where the light was better, sat himself up on the countertop, and poured his eyes over the bloody detail. The baby in the photograph once had been a living creature with a human form despite its young age and its stretched, torn body. After a minute of soaking up the image, any doubts about the wrongness of abortion were gone forever. But he did not know what he could do about the killing. He resolved at least that he would not call the legal authorities, those who allowed this to happen—he might never call them. What a madman's hell this world was.

Stan's lunch hour passed; the detention students had come and gone, and the afternoon classes—when he began showing the film that he had previewed over the weekend—flowed easily. He graded papers during the mandatory half-hour after classes were over, then he drove home and changed into a cycling outfit. The traffic was not heavy yet, the homeward crush not having begun. He rode a long, fast loop east and back to get in his exercise and then turned left into the mid-stream of vehicles traveling toward Fort Vancouver. At last, he took a side road through dense trees. Stan loved the large old homes in this part of town, which had once made up a military hospital complex. Below this was the full-scale replica of the original fort. South of the fort was a small airstrip with many painted hangars, and to the southwest, Stan could see the interstate bridge crossing the river. The palisade wall of the fort was made of sharpened logs. The fort only had one bastion, but this was how the original fortification had been built back in the mid-1800s.

Most of the buildings inside the replica had been completed, but a construction crew labored away in an unfinished corner.

There was a tannery, the Hudson's Bay Store, a jail, a collection building full of furs, and a blacksmith shop now emanating black coal-smoke. At this hour on a Monday afternoon, the place was not busy with the usual school children visitors.

Stan leaned his bike against a light post and sat on a bench facing the gardens outside the walls. "This is crazy," he said. *Maybe the whole thing is a hoax cooked up by my students.* The hands of his watch dragged past the 5 o'clock hour, and Stan thought he should give up on his "friend." Tall, ragged Douglas fir trees standing guard nearby did not impinge upon his consciousness. He was watching jets in the southern sky surging from the Portland airport, and so, until he heard Dr. Sterne's step, he did not notice him ambling down the walkway.

Stan jumped up, panicked to not have a reasonable explanation for his idleness at this out-of-the-way place. He blurted, "Dr. Sterne, what are you doing here?"

"Good afternoon, Stan. I have a friend at the air museum and I'm on the board of the Fort Vancouver Replica Association, so I have reasons for coming this way. Mindy may not have told you that I also own a small plane. Today I thought I would take it up for a spin. You've been bike riding?"

Stan was further disconcerted by Sterne's overly-thorough answer and decided to explain himself. "I was supposed to meet someone here, but they're . . . they're late."

"Oh, I see. If your party isn't coming, then perhaps you would care to join me? It's spiritually invigorating. Having a different viewpoint on the world and taking your life in your hands. We'll only be in the air until dusk. How about it?" Sterne glanced toward the next door armory where green painted military vehicles were parked inside an intimidating fence.

Stan was relieved to shake off the mystery of the unknown, uncertain person. "Sure. Let's go. But, this will be my first time flying in an airplane."

"You'll do fine," Sterne said.

Stan rode his bike the short distance to the hangar as Dr. Sterne drove his van. Sterne walked around his single engine four-seater Cessna to make a visual inspection. Then the two men pushed it out the hangar door. They climbed into the aircraft, and Sterne gave Stan a headset. Sterne started up the engine.

They taxied to one end of the strip and turned to face west. Sterne worked down his checklist and got final clearance from the tower; the engine roared and the acceleration jammed Stan into his seat. The plane rattled and buildings flashed by. Then the shaking ceased and everything dropped away; looking through his window, Stan saw that they were already high up and climbing. Cars crept along the highway and shrank; sailboats on the river became toys.

Dr. Sterne's face was calm and joyful, making him look younger than before. Impressed, Stan now better understood the Sterne children's adventuresome spirit.

"I love this," said Sterne, speaking to Stan through the headset. "This plane is small, but it has power, and can fly at 20,000 feet. Life begins at 200 mph." He turned the plane northeast until Mt. St. Helens loomed ahead. "My son Anselm loves to climb mountains, and I did once. Now that I'm older, I cheat."

They approached the mountain with its broken, oval chasm. The plane made a long sweeping turn just outside the crater rim and Stan looked sideways out the window, straight down. A trail of steam emanated from the dome inside. The size and scale of the mountain, the broken, chaotic terrain, the proximity to the scene of recent geologic violence—all was stunning and exhilarating. He felt sure that they would crash and die, but this did not trouble him; he was too excited.

Dr. Sterne noted Stan's mood. He turned the plane away from the mountain to the north and then looped back again. Sterne dropped altitude and aimed the plane straight into the maw of the crater, the walls of it looming up all around. "Don't worry," he said. The plane began climbing steeply but seemed headed for the far crater wall. At the last instant, Sterne lifted the nose more and kicked in extra horsepower, and the plane zoomed right over the edge of the mountain.

"A missionary aviator taught me this," he said. "What do you think?"

"It makes me glad to be alive," Stan said, half-grinning.

"Good. Stan, there's something I need to say, and I'll be very direct."

Stan waited, still feeling the thrill of danger, not fully attending to what Sterne was saying.

"I'm giving you permission to court my daughter, Mindy."

"What?" Stan wasn't sure he had heard what he heard.

"I am giving you permission to court my daughter."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Stan, "I don't know what you mean."

Stan indeed did have an idea of what Dr. Sterne meant, and he thrilled at the suggestion, but the sudden and unconventional forwardness confounded him.

"Mindy and I have spoken together about you, Stan. I recognize that the practice of courtship may not be familiar to you, but we are a traditional family and have chosen to be so because of the dangers presented to young people by our degraded society."

The plane flew along smoothly without bumps or drops and the sound of the engine faded into the background—Dr. Sterne had throttled back and was not attempting more aerial acrobatics. To Stan's right, as it passed over the Pacific Ocean, the sun reddened the soft cottony clouds above the horizon. None of this seemed real to Stan, and he said nothing.

Sterne continued. "As I said, I know you, Stan, better than you realize. From our book discussions. What I have seen today confirms this: you have a courageous heart. You deal well with ambiguity and uncertainty, and might make an excellent match for my daughter."

Stan began to say something meaningless, but Sterne interrupted him, "The reason I'm speaking to you in this blunt fashion is, your upbringing wouldn't lead you to ask for permission to court, and your notions of the proper procedure for becoming acquainted with a young woman might require an unneeded delay. But at this point in Mindy's life, it's important that she prepare for marriage."

Stan cringed at the frankness and felt trapped in the small cockpit. If he had a parachute, he might jump into the air. He stammered, "I'm, I'm sure, sir, that I have not—"

"Stan," Dr. Sterne interrupted again gently, "you don't have to respond now. Just think about it awhile, for a few days or weeks. There is no pressure about your decision. But Mindy will need comfort now over Beth's passing, and I hope you'll go to the funeral. Of course, just because I've given you permission

to court her doesn't mean you will be the fortunate man. There are other suitors."

"There are?"

Stan now felt twinges of jealousy and urgency. Indeed, perhaps he had better move faster. He also felt exposed, as if he had been given a physical examination—humiliating, but necessary. Sterne's manner was professional. *He* clearly felt no discomfort, and Stan began to absorb the calmness.

"One, maybe two suitors. One is a family friend of noble character and a refined and amicable nature—a widower with small children. The other fellow is young and, well, too much like us, like our family, I mean. He has had a strict upbringing and is well trained. But I like you, Stan. You are different, and Mindy needs, let me say, wider perspective. But, of course, she herself must decide whom she marries. My job is to be her protector and guide."

Stan remained silent. The plane neared the city; the lights below glowed in golden patches and Dr. Sterne glided the craft down onto the landing strip. Stan sighed and relaxed. He felt exhausted. Dr. Sterne drew the plane to the edge of some pavement where other small planes were parked in rows. "I'm going to leave it out tonight," he said.

After Sterne hooked in the tiedowns, he offered to take Stan home. The bike was tucked through the side door of Sterne's van, and Stan took the front passenger seat. It was not far to his house by car, and Dr. Sterne pulled up to the curb and shut off the engine. "I realize I've given you a lot to think about, but there's more. I'll just say this and then I must go—they're expecting me for dinner, and I'm late already."

Stan had been dumbfounded today already, so he was prepared for anything.

"If you wish to court Mindy—meaning to become acquainted with her with the aim of winning her as your wife—I want you to secure your parents' permission."

Stan nodded agreeably.

"Also, and I'm sorry to be unloading and running, but please keep Mindy away from the abortion place. And don't tell her that I have asked you this."

Stan's mind went completely numb. "You?" he managed to blurt, his voice thick. "You called me the other night?"

"Someone else. But I'll talk with you later about this. Okay?"

Overwhelmed with confusing thoughts, Stan could not answer.

"It's too bad about the Telford girl," Sterne said. "Mindy liked her. A great shame. And the baby . . . I trust you'll be attending the funeral?"

Stan could say nothing.

"I hope so. Goodnight, Stan."

"Huh? Oh, goodnight." Bewildered, Stan climbed from the van and pulled out his bicycle.

He stood in his driveway a long while, with questions flying through his mind.

+ + +

Stan had no time for seeking answers and he set aside the matter of Sterne's connection to the recent odd occurrences in his life.

He arranged for a substitute teacher so he could attend Beth's funeral. Her family did not want a separate memorial service; they planned for the whole of it to take place during the burial. The cemetery lay south of Portland on a sloping elevation on the west side of the Willamette River. On a clear day, Mt. Hood could be seen to the east, but today, frigid mists obscured the mountain. When he arrived, Stan found Mindy mingling with other people her age. She wore a long black wool coat and a black knitted stocking hat—an outfit Stan found fetching on her. Those people near Mindy formed two groups around the funeral tent, and Mindy stood between them. A handful of girls of Mindy's acquaintance from the University made one group, and the other larger one was of Beth's friends, young men and women, some from the cast of *Macbeth*, others from the soccer and cross country teams. Beth's parents attended, and a brother—not the one living in New Zealand—and a smattering of other relatives.

Mindy greeted Stan with a silent nod and he took a place close beside her. He felt sad by the memories of the once-living person whose body rested in the box before him, but he also felt strongly alive and joyful in Mindy's presence. Stan panned the

assembly looking for Tommy, and was surprised to not see him, even though Tommy had kept out of sight since Beth's death.

No one detected Tommy sitting on a concrete bench and hidden behind a bushy evergreen tree further up the hill as he watched the gathering through binoculars, which he periodically raised and lowered. Breezes swayed and billowed the tree beside him and blew his hair into his eyes. Not being closer and not hearing the words, Tommy nonetheless missed little of what he sought. He came only because he could not stay away. He wanted to be near Beth, but a funeral helps people reconcile to the death of a loved one, and Tommy would not be reconciled.

Beth's mom had been too embarrassed to ask her parish priest to perform the burial because he would have insisted upon conducting Mass. The Catholic priest that she found did his best, not knowing the family, other than from what he learned in one conversation. Beth's brother grunted when the priest said Beth had died from negative reactions following a tumor removal. The priest presented the gospel of redemption through Christ's death and spoke of the resurrection, but he could see neither hope nor cleansing grief as he scanned the eyes of family members. He saw only bitter numbness in Beth's mother and brother, and a distracted restlessness in her father, who paced in 90 degree turns apart from the others, a hand jammed into his pants pocket and smoking one cigarette after another, stamping each butt into the turf.

Men hired by the funeral home lowered the casket and the priest threw a handful of soil into the hole as if he were sowing seeds. Some of the girls tossed in flowers they had been holding in their hands. Stan put in an evergreen sprig and Beth's brother silently resented these presumptions.

After the final amen, Stan wanted to speak to the priest. Mindy took Stan by the elbow and said, "Wait around for a few minutes, can you?" She moved away and began speaking with Beth's friends. Four of the girls who were with Mindy quickly walked to a vehicle parked nearby along the cemetery road and unloaded what appeared to be musical instrument cases. Beth's parents and brother proceeded to the short line of black limousines. The priest saw them off. He looked toward the

grave where some of the attendees had remained and then he moved back toward the gravesite.

Stan approached him and they met halfway. He shook the priest's hand. "Good afternoon, Father. My name is Stan Timmons. I knew Beth Telford and appreciated what you said. I don't know if it makes any difference, but Beth really did not die of a tumor."

The priest nodded. "Is that so? Why should her mother have told me otherwise?"

Stan took a deep breath and blew it out tempestuously, puffing his cheeks. He took another breath to say, "I'm not sure I should tell you this, but she died from an abortion."

The priest studied the ground. "Let's sit down for a moment." They settled onto a nearby bench. "How do you know this is true, how she died?"

"A friend of mine was close to Beth. She tried to discourage her from aborting."

"Who and where is the father?"

"Mr. Telford. I think he was the nervous fellow who chain smoked today."

"No. I'm sorry. I mean the father of the baby."

Stan had to consider this for a second. "Tommy Duckwitz. I don't know where he is."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes. Sort of a friend. Yes, he is."

"And the baby? What happened to the remains?"

"I don't know." Stan thought it wise to not mention the photograph.

"Let me say this to you . . . I can see you are a caring person. Are you a Christian?"

"Yes."

"Let me say, there's something terribly wrong about this tragedy, more than meets the eye. Something in the air. I've attended several funerals like this one in the past few years. In talking with Beth's family, I saw pent up emotion and deception. I can't say how anything will be manifested, but there are forces moving which have potential for further destruction and harm if there's no intervention. In particular, Mr. Telford is hiding a secret, and it eats his life away. I think he is capable of—and I

hesitate to say, because I'm only guessing—he seems capable of violence. And the father of the baby . . . We have so many young men who have no fathers of their own at home. And these young men's children are being aborted. There is anger. One day this will break out with predictable, dreadful consequences."

The priest paused and looked east toward the hidden peak.

Stan waited.

"People living in view of mountains are said to be happier, you know," the priest continued. "Surely Elisabeth and her boyfriend were happy in spite of the troubles brought by their parents' poor choices and the influence of the culture. They are—were—children of the age, tossed about by every wave of the sea, thinking that the fashionable waves were the ocean, or worse, the ground of being. In their young lives, they disregarded ancient warnings and taboos. These children possessed native strength; they are offspring of pioneers and immigrants that had found life stuffy in the East. Their ancestors survived privations, harsh weather, and oppressive labor, but Elisabeth did not survive our culture of death, and her boyfriend—your friend—may not survive it, without your help."

"What do you mean?" Stan asked.

"Here's a challenge I give to you, Mr. . . . Tim."

"Timmons."

"I'm sorry. If you can do something, Mr. Timmons, it may help bring healing. First, find who was with Elisabeth before she died. Talk with them and see what you can learn. I myself will ask a few questions. I know some chaplains at the hospital. Second, if you find anything significant, share it with your friend . . . the baby's father. His name again?"

"Tommy."

"Of course, Thomas."

"Why would this help?"

The priest spoke as if he were thinking to himself. "Elisabeth's mother said other things to me that I believe now are not true. I think Elisabeth lived an immoral life with regard to sexual relations. She aborted her baby and is guilty of murder. She paid a terrible price: heartbreaking, but just. And yet she was a victim too, of a lack of love, and of a permissive society. Of callous, dishonest medical people and corrupted leaders."

The priest now looked at Stan. "With my vocation, you understand, I've attended many deaths. It may be that Elisabeth made a deathbed repentance and confession of faith. If so, it would help the survivors. It would be a comfort and a witness to her parents and her brothers. It might save Thomas from a malignant fate. See what you can learn, alright?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"And there's something else."

"Uh, what?"

"I see you are not wearing a wedding ring. Are you married?"

"No. Never been married."

"The young girl you were standing near during the service? She's someone you care about? And she is . . . never married?"

"Yes."

"You should marry soon and begin your family while you are young. This girl may be the right one for you—she is pure of heart. Have a large family. I say this to all the young people, so don't worry; I'm not a prophet. If you want me to give you marriage counseling, you know, call me. Now I must say a prayer for Thomas, and the baby. Did the baby have a name?"

Stan had winced at the priest's audacity. Everyone wanted him to get married; but because of the soberness of the day, he suppressed his pride and answered, "Someone said Pandora."

"Hmmm . . . Well, when you see Thomas, ask him to name the baby and then you must tell me. Here's my phone number." The priest scribbled on a scrap of paper.

He and Stan rose to return to the gravesite. Mindy's friends had brought out two violins, a viola, and a cello, and they had tuned and were ready. Mindy was seated on a concrete bench and made room for Stan. The priest knelt down on the green carpet and began praying in Latin, his voice nearly inaudible. The music began, and Stan's spirit swelled and sank with the pathos and beauty of the rich harmony and sorrowful melody.

Away up the sloping hill, Tommy stood and crept a few steps closer to hear better, as close as he dared without being seen. He did not recognize the song, a classical arrangement by a contemporary musician. He did not know that it was a song that Beth had loved—she had hoped to play it for him someday.

The music wept and danced; it echoed and chased itself. Beth's friends, some of whom were unfamiliar with this type of music, were transported to a country they had never guessed existed—where joy, beauty, and sorrow mingled. They stood in awe, impressed at the difference between the official funeral, which was cold except for the priest's unwelcome words, and what they now heard. Some of them cried again. The music reminded Stan of *Death and the Maiden* by Schubert. Mindy began to sob silently, and Stan put his arm around her shoulder.

He knew now what he had to ask her—about courtship—but it had to be the right time and place. She did not ease away from him and Stan felt her shaking under his arm, and his own eyes became blinded. Images swirled through his tears. The music became meditatively cheerful for a few stanzas. He shut his eyes and listened; his throat hurt. The cool air on his face calmed him. He could hear the priest's comforting voice chanting below the notes. The music rose, fell, and rose again. It sang a mournful fugue, repeating and covering former ground with new feeling, and the trees around the cemetery moved in time. Even the sailing clouds seemed to synchronize to the music. But then the music sank to an indefinite, confused whisper and came to a closing silence until only the wind was audible. Stan sighed, opened his eyes, and brushed the tears from his face. The priest had risen and was limping slowly away, stiff from kneeling.

Stan let his arm down from Mindy's shoulder. He stood and put out his hand to help her up from the bench. They turned and moved side by side toward where the cars were parked.

"Thank you for coming," she said.

"I want to visit you. May I come see you sometime, when you're home?"

"Yes. Why don't you come for dinner this weekend? Friday night. 6:30? Not everyone will be home, just Mom and my younger siblings; it will be informal, but you'll be more comfortable without a full dress inspection."

Because of the impetus of his boldness and release from his tension, Stan laughed louder than he would have otherwise. They stood without speaking for a minute, neither of them knowing what more to say, but watching the people and movement around them.

Mindy's friends and Beth's friends, though having differing lifestyles and diverging cultural tastes, were arranging for a musical get-together. Some of them traded hugs and soon everyone began to leave. Stan held and closed the car door for Mindy. She waved to him and drove away. Stan jogged to his own car and stopped, looking around. He thought he could hear a high thin strain of the melody that Mindy's friends had just played. The sound swept across the treetops and was gone. He drove away wondering how he could find Tommy.

It was Tommy who had whistled.

After everyone left, he walked down to the unfilled grave, grabbed a shovel, and for several furious minutes threw dirt into the hole, the tears dropping at his feet. Unusually fatigued after so brief an exertion, he threw down the shovel. What was he to do now? He wanted to dig Beth up again, but he didn't have the strength.

Finally, bored in addition to everything else, he knew he must leave. But first he bent down and picked up the trampled cigarette butts, stuffing them into his pocket.

Screenshot of Mt. Hood from a southwest Portland cemetery.
VIDEO BY A RELATIVE OF THE AUTHOR, March 1998

The next morning, I told myself, "Yesterday was just a bad dream. It didn't happen."

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

A church courtyard very near an abortion place.

Chapter Twelve
Planning the Future

When Beth died, much of Tommy Duckwitz died with her, but like a bacterial infection incompletely treated by antibiotics, those resilient parts of him that survived grew stronger. His first impulse had been to take his gun and, if he could find him, kill the doctor who had killed Beth, and then take his own life. Nothing else held any meaning for him now. His grandparents were gone. His parents had divorced each other and him. His friend Stan had discovered his love. But Tommy did not know how to find Dr. Ponder right away and so he, Tommy, had to live a while longer . . .

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On the Friday when Tommy left Beth at the abortion place, after he drove past the site and saw that it was closed and Beth's car was gone, he tried unsuccessfully to reach her on her phone and decided she probably wanted to rest. He did not begin to fear a problem until the fourth time he tried to call her on Saturday. When her parents' home telephone went unanswered, he drove to the University campus and inquired at her dorm. Her roommate told him what he already knew—Beth planned to spend the weekend at her parents' house. He drove there next and watched from across the street. Her car was parked in front and he tried the home number again—no answer. For the first time ever, he went to the front door and rang the bell. No answer. He tried the locked gate beside the house, scaled the wooden wall and went around to the back door. The door was also locked. No one was home. This whole situation was strange, because ever since they had been together, Beth had never been inaccessible, or he had always known where she was.

He sat in his truck and waited until well after dark. Every so often, a different group of men passed by on the sidewalk—gang members. Occasionally a woman walked with them. Three men

stopped in the street behind Tommy's truck and admired it with crescendoing verbal rapacity. Becoming annoyed, Tommy jumped from the truck and stared at them fiercely. One of the men swaggered up to Tommy and said, "Hey, brother, let me borrow your conveyance!" The other men circled around, one on Tommy's right in the street and the other reached the passenger side door and tried the handle. Tommy continued to say nothing, until the first man looked down to Tommy's hand and saw the compact charcoal form and the darker, nearly half-inch hole pointing at the middle of his chest.

Tommy spoke blandly, "Sorry, friend, I need my truck. Maybe some other time, okay?" Tommy recognized a flash of genuine fear on the other man's face, and the man backed away, his hands spread wide.

The man groaned and said, "Just asking. Just asking." Under his breath he said, "She-it!" In full voice again he called out, faking confidence, "Hey, my comrades, it would be best to proceed to another locality."

They retreated, laughing and joking more loudly the further they went. As he put the gun away, Tommy heard a boisterous curse from them, and he leaned against the truck and sighed with relief. He hadn't wanted to pull his gun, because if the men jumped him, he knew that though he would have killed one, maybe two, there was no telling what would have followed. The men likely had been armed; and later there would be the police. But he had finessed his moves perfectly. If he had acted with less resolve, they might have worked themselves up for violence. They might have knifed him and stolen his truck. As far as Tommy was concerned, they had picked a good time; his anxiety over Beth put him in no mood to fiddle-faddle with hoodlums, otherwise, he might have tried to negotiate to his loss, perhaps giving them money. He checked his watch; they could return later, guns in hands, hands in pockets, and in no mood for courtesy.

The windows in Beth's house were black.

At about 11:00 p.m., a taxi turned into the driveway of the house and an older man struggled from the passenger side. The taxi drove away and the man staggered to the front door and let himself in. Lights came up in one room of the house and then

another. Tommy waited and waited for an interminable hour and decided to risk asking for Beth. He ventured again to the front door and rang the bell. A long minute passed, Tommy rang again and he heard a muffled voice from inside the door shouting, "What do you want?!"

Tommy would not shout back so that the whole street could hear, so he was stumped. No one would likely open the door until Tommy had communicated. A thought flashed through his mind and he ran back to the truck and hastily wrote a note. He was trying to decide if he should ring the doorbell once more, when he heard the muted shouting again.

He pushed the note into the mail slot. The brass cover of the slot rang shut and the shouting stopped.

Tommy listened to sirens wail from the direction of the central city. He heard a chain clicking and a deadbolt thunk. The door opened slowly and Tommy found himself staring into the red, weepy eyes of Mr. Telford. Tommy lowered his eyes and gazed at the black-synthetic and steel shotgun aimed at his heart.

Telford's voice gurgled from his throat. "You're a friend of Beth's? She's dying. She's dead, and it's your fault, you bastard." Telford then screamed, "It's your fault!"

Tommy lowered his eyes further to the floor and to Telford's bare feet. He steadied himself with the handrail and slowly backed down the steps. Telford followed onto the porch, still aiming the shotgun at Tommy, who took a slow breath and turned around. With his back to Telford, he walked down the entrance pavement with infinite care, expecting to die.

Telford followed, screaming louder and higher pitched, "She's dead, and you killed her!" but Tommy did not dare turn around. He had to find Beth.

In an instant, he flinched and went deaf. He was killed. No, he was mistaken; it was only a touch on the back and a white movement beside him on the ground. He took a sidestep, bent at his knees, and picked up his crumpled note that Telford had flung after him.

It took forever, but he reached his pickup. Telford had followed and lapsed into whimpering, but still aimed the shotgun at Tommy, who climbed into the truck's cab in slow motion. Telford stepped sideways until he stood in front of the pickup,

and Tommy put it into reverse; his tires squealed as the truck jerked into motion. Telford cowered at the noise and Tommy roared backwards, swung into a driveway, and then sedately shifted into forward and glided away until he had cleared the neighborhood.

With no one present he could blame, Telford collapsed on the grass strip between the curb and the sidewalk and lay there long after Tommy was gone. Staccato voices came to him and he smelled freshly disturbed dog manure. He rose to his feet but did not give heed to the three young men who stood nearby, the same who had tried to steal Tommy's truck. They gaped at the pitiable man, barefooted, dressed in a bathrobe and lamely dangling a shotgun in one hand. Not knowing the reasons for his anguish, they nevertheless felt sorry for him. Telford dragged himself inside and resumed searching for the shotgun shells that his wife had hidden long ago.

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By this time, Tommy guessed that Beth must be at the nearest hospital, which would be Providence. He raced along, reckless of red lights, but darting his attention to traffic obstacles and checking for police. Once at the hospital, he moved with deliberate genius through every minute bureaucracy and hindrance and entered the room that had just witnessed Beth's last breaths. As he walked in, a dark-clothed figure slipped past him out the door and Tommy hardly noticed. The room was empty but for her body—a doctor, nurses, and Beth's mother inadvertently having withdrawn from the room for him to say farewell while warmth remained in her flesh.

Tommy had raced to the hospital hoping to save Beth. But once he had arrived, no prayer, no entreaty, no tears or denial made any difference, and so at last he quit, held her once more as if she were a fragile marble sculpture, then he let go and straightened up. He kissed his fingers and was about to touch them to her cheek when the door opened behind him. Tommy abruptly turned and pushed past a nurse.

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Numb to the lateness of the night, after he left Beth's body and the hospital, Tommy drove across the river to his grandparents' farm. His spirit screamed one continuous scream and his body writhed in resentment. How could he remove the overwhelming, incomprehensible pain? He scrounged in his closet and found tranquilizers that he had stolen from the college infirmary some time ago. Swallowing two, he sat in a big chair in his room and waited. The pills took far too long to work and he jumped up, upended the bed where he and Beth had slept, and tore the frame loose. He stood on the mattress and swung metal around the room, gouging holes in the walls and breaking a mirror, lamps, and the windows. The tranquilizers hit. Stunned by the sudden absence of feeling, he looked at his bloody hands and sank onto the mattress. There he lay, with the night pouring through the shattered panes until the sun rose over the horizon.

He was chilled. He woke just enough to roll under the blankets but refused to open his eyes. Warming, Tommy slept again until before noon. He knew not by what means he rose from the ruined bed, built a fire in the woodstove, and fixed food. He wanted to call Beth and talk with her about his pain, but he did not remember her number and could not find his phone. He washed the dishes—obeying a compulsion to neatness—and took his grandfather's hunting rifle from the safe, loaded the magazine, chambered a round, and sitting on the fireplace hearth, he put the barrel's end against his forehead. He stayed like this for five minutes unresolved, and then, bored, put the gun down.

He had to find Ponder.

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In the crisp October days following the funeral, Tommy stopped attending classes at school. He performed only necessary chores around the farm, read novels and *Reader's Digests*, and watched old movies on television. When he stumbled across a listing of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, he ordered it to be shipped and he watched it repeatedly until he began to live in the movie. He cut firewood and checked on the livestock. The days passed until he ceased counting them. His loss gripped his head and heart like a tourniquet, cutting off the flow of life. He gave up thoughts of suicide because he was convinced he was already dead. The

pain he tried to bury. There was one purpose left, and he was serene. This purpose emerged as his physical self gained ascendancy over his ravaged emotions. His body took control, and gave him strength and well-being, though it was meaningless. He felt hungry and he ate. He had energy and he worked and walked the property. He smelled the delicious, fresh-cut late hay of the neighboring farm, but without Beth it stank. He looked at the haying photographs he had taken of her, but they, not being alive, never changed; she never moved in them, and he filed them away—they hurt too much.

His reason for existence was to remember her, and remember his baby. To re-create them in memory. The death of the nascent child gave birth to the baby in his mind. He entered into an extensive fantasy, and lay in bed for hours with his eyes closed, playing out all the things they would do together.

Tommy pictured his and Beth's wedding on the farm in the grass under a shady tree. Sweet music haunted the empty rooms of the house. His parents came. They both had become disenchanted with their current partners. Seeing Beth and Portia their granddaughter so lovely, his parents spoke with kindness to each other. Eventually, they rekindled their love and remarried. Portia, who saved her father's life in the *Merchant of Venice*. . . Tommy and Beth put aside ambitions and strolled through Italian villages and cities with friends, and during the northern hemisphere winter, they trekked around summer-clad New Zealand mountains, taking their daughter with them. Pack burros carried their gear, and they lived in the joy of the natural world, far from the chaos of civilization. Tommy enjoyed vital roles in Portland theater. Beth also worked in the theater until another child came, and then she became a homemaker. Her gifts enriched their lives and those in their community. They did programs in the schools—acting workshops and discussions. Stan and Mindy had stood as godparents during the baptisms of the Telford-Duckwitz children, and all through the growing years, Stan and Mindy supported them in transcendent matters, especially remembering them with birthday presents. Tommy and Beth guided their daughter and filled her life, so when darkness threatened, she was enabled to abstain from the evils circling around. Their son, too, Thomas Junior, grew tall and

strong of character, wise in any enterprise. He married Stan and Mindy's third daughter. The holidays brought everyone together with happy play and music, and flowers, and blessings too fulsome to hold. Tommy and Beth lived to see their grandchildren—and there were many who came to visit and live with them over the years. Tommy smiled when he thought of children coming up to him, wrapping their strong, sweet-smelling arms around his neck and exclaiming, "I love you." Beth and Tommy grew old together in affection, and they insulated one another against the cruel outside world, remembering the wonderful, full days without end.

And so on.

When this fantasy grew old and tiresome, as fantasies eventually always do, Tommy bitterly reformulated his idea to honor Beth and his child by taking vengeance upon those who killed her and the futures he had envisioned. His mind did not lose touch with reality in any other way, but the low fire burning in his head brought certainty that he must destroy Ponder. Afterwards, he would join Beth in the afterlife, if he could, if there was one, and see his daughter.

Tommy suspected—before Beth died—that his course had been off-kilter with the cosmos. This he did not admit when circumstances brought him the pleasure of love, friendship, and success. At those times, he nudged the doubts away or attributed them to irrational guilt over outmoded social norms. Now regularly, his trauma forced him to confront the dichotomy between what he had chosen and what he instinctively knew his existence was supposed to be like. But that same paralyzing trauma made it impossible for him to alter his course. When he felt bad, he wanted no one to see him; when he felt better, he did not need help from anyone.

Every day, climbing over barbwire fences and bushwhacking through hedgerows and thick patches of trees, Tommy traversed his farm and the neighboring forests. He wandered at high speed. He must keep in shape. The exercise left him feeling rested and strong. He could sleep better; he had an appetite, and his mind was clearer. But the contemplation of a different course that he had never taken—to seek help—left him feeling sick. He knew he should see Stan. Sitting with him and

weeping—releasing the weakness before another person—would lead to peaceful, healthful resignation. But he would have to give up his entire life-itinerary and admit that he had been wrong. He would have to give up Beth. He would have to apologize to her parents and it might be fatal. There was a dark vision ahead in this direction, and the forces within him rejected the change. Tommy would not see Stan and the path before him was clear and bright.

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One cloudy day before Thanksgiving, he returned to Portland for the first time since the funeral. Early in the morning, he stopped by the lawyer's office and told him he planned to marry. The lawyer congratulated him and wrote an advance for $9,900 as a personal loan, said to bring the marriage documentation by, and then he would release the oil bonds. "Your grandfather would be pleased," the attorney said. Tommy cashed the attorney's check at his bank. He cleared his stuff from the apartment, keeping a few books and his make-up kits, but throwing most of the rest into the dumpster—he had already moved the swords. He paid his rent and went upstairs to see if Franklin was in.

Franklin was glad. "Hey, I thought you fell-fell off the planet! Come in. Come ins-inside."

Tommy flopped onto a new couch.

Franklin wanted to be supportive, and pulled a chair up close to him. "You look old. It's been tough? S-sorry about Beh-Beth. She was a lovely girl. A tragedy. How've you been co-coping?"

Tommy did not answer.

Franklin grimaced and said softly, "What do you-you miss about her?"

Tommy had spoken little in the past weeks and he felt as if Franklin could see into his heart.

"Everything."

There was another long pause, and Franklin hummed an empathetic, "Hmmm."

"Franklin, help me."

"Anything, Tommy." Franklin sat down at his computer. "Someone you want to hurt?"

"Yes, but not a person. A thing with body hair."

"Huh . . . Who? Ponder of the Golden Knife, or your f-f-friend Schenk?"

"What?" Tommy had not thought of Talus Schenk for a long while; his mind was so occupied with Ponder that the other villain had not appeared in his short-term catalog.

"Who do you want to hurt?"

"Buy me an unregistered rifle. One with no history. I need a breakdown sniper rifle with a heavy barrel, a scope, a silencer, and a case." He gave Franklin a printout containing specifications.

Franklin leaned back in his chair, looked at the paper, and growled a long, drawn out "Ohhh, mother. You're talking business with baa-bad people." He did not clarify as to whether the people were Tommy's targets or those from whom he would buy the gun. He stood up and walked about, chewing his lower lip. He grunted sharply. "This sss . . . sounds serious. The rifle's easy. But what'll follow if you assassinate an ab-abortion doctor? Hell will break loose. Isn't there another option? Maybe f-find another girlfriend."

Tommy twisted his body off the couch and Franklin studied him as he lurched to a window.

"Personally, I would never abort a doctor," Franklin said, "but I wouldn't want to impose my na-narrow-minded values on anyone, especially in a hard case like yours." He laughed through his nose, but Tommy took no notice.

He was watching an obscenely overweight woman below on the sidewalk. She carried several packages in her arms and two young children walked beside her. She struggled to open the door of her building, but she lost balance and leaned heavily against the wall. People passed her, but would not help. She set her packages onto the ground.

Tommy turned back to Franklin. "Will you buy the gun?
I have $7,000 in cash right here."

He brought out the money in a paper bag.

Franklin shook his head. "7,000? Covers the gun. But I will nee-need an additional 2,000 for my service. $9,000 total. Here. Give me what you have. But I won't promise anything. And if I don't find your gun, there'll be my fee."

Tommy held onto the thick bundle.

Franklin shrugged. "Okay. Commission only, but $10,000 total. Money back if I don't find what you want or beh-better. An undocumented sniper rifle with extras. Ammunition. And no memories. We'll have to terminate our relationship, because it'll be too s-scary for bo-both of us."

"It'll have to do."

Franklin paused. There was shouting outside the apartment door. He stepped toward the door as if to check the hallway, but he stopped and came back. "Hmmm. Let me think about this a minute. Have you talked with anyone else about yo-your idea?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely no one."

"What connections do you-you have with this doctor? Why won't the police pick you-you up when they look for suspects?" Franklin went through a series of questions to see how liable Tommy was to be caught. As Franklin accumulated the answers, he began to formulate his own plan of turning Tommy in after the shooting, if the reward offered was large enough, and if his own fingerprints did not appear on the gun transaction.

Tommy endured the questioning. He did not care if he got caught, but killing the abortionist might not be enough. Schenk, for example. He wanted a sniper rifle for accuracy but also did not want to defile the memory of his grandfather by using his rifle to kill someone. He wanted secrecy only for success.

Franklin blinked and fidgeted where he stood. "No offense, buh-but I just have to ask. Are you . . . you an accurate shot?"

"I thought you might be interested." Tommy pulled a rectangular paper wad from his pocket and noticed that his shirt had been improperly buttoned. Tommy unfolded the wad, which was a target. "Two hundred yards with my hunting rifle. The group is within a two-inch spread. With my new rifle, I'll make one to ½-inch patterns."

Tommy told Franklin more details of his idea, and Franklin gave thought to all he heard, and made suggestions, some of which Tommy believed would improve the plan. Franklin took a deep breath, sat down again at his computer, and watched while Tommy undid and realigned the buttons on his shirt.

Franklin picked up the money and counted it. "You have $3,000 more?"

"Won't be a problem."

"Did you s-sell your swords? I'd take them."

"I'm keeping them."

"Well, I've enjoyed knowing you-you," Franklin said with a note of sadness. He walked to the door and opened it. The shouting had long stopped, but he made a quick scan up and down the hallway. "And, you-you really shouldn't do what you're thinking. Get on and enjoy yourself. Life is all we have. Here, take your muh-muh-money and go on a vacation to Hawaii or South America. I'm planning a trip, myself." He held the bundle out to Tommy.

Tommy shook his head.

"Buh-but who am I to instruct you? I'm pro-choice. Be here two weeks from today, in the morning. Don't phone unless you change yo-your mind. If you don't call by tonight, come in two weeks and bring the additional muh-money. We'll take a walk, trade, and that-that's the end."

"Sounds perfect."

After he left the apartment building, Tommy went to the courthouse and asked to apply for a marriage certificate. The clerk glanced behind Tommy and said, "The young lady must be present to sign the forms."

Tommy suddenly felt self-conscious and said, "Oh, give me the papers to look at."

The clerk handed him the forms and the worksheet, and he pointed out the salient instructions. "There's a three-day waiting period. You don't want to do it on a whim."

Tommy walked along the busy sidewalk and read the material. He would hire a prostitute, coach her, fill out the application today, and in three days come back to Portland to marry her, so he could pay the lawyer back and get the rest of the money for his honeymoon with Beth—money that he had expected to spend on their honeymoon.

He took ample time shopping for the right girl for the bride's part. Most of the whores he saw were not pretty and/or fresh enough. The young, novice prostitute he settled upon called herself Abigail. She was flattered and amused to have marriage

without sex, when her trade was sex without marriage; and she was to be paid well, many times more than ordinarily. She gamely accompanied him to the license application signing and agreed to be available for the ceremony following the waiting period, which would fall after the Thanksgiving holiday.

Long after the barren wedding before a Justice of the Peace, whenever she thought back to this handsome, troubled young man with the wavy hair, she wished he had married her for real and rescued her from her wretched self and her slavery.

After he hired Abigail and paid her a deposit, Tommy returned to the farm and unloaded the boxes from his apartment. Late in the afternoon, he heard a car coming down the driveway. Stan Timmons. Tommy hurriedly locked the doors, turned out the lights, and climbed the stairs to an upper room.

Tommy hardened himself as he heard Stan call his name, ring the iron triangle, and honk the Chevrolet's horn. Stan climbed back into his car. From behind lacy curtains at the window, Tommy watched the dust of the gravel curling from under the tires, swirling into the air, drifting away, until Stan's car vanished. He ran down the stairs to the front door, noticed a letter Stan had left, and crunched the sheet of paper into a tight ball. Tommy wanted to talk with him, but Stan did not fit the world Tommy was building. Stan would have to force his way inside, and even then he would face a formidable fight. This fight is what Tommy craved, but there are few people selfless enough that they would continue loving in the face of hatred—a hatred that demanded perfect, aggressive love and acceptance, or it would receive nothing. He threw the unread letter into the woodstove. Stan would have to do better.

Tommy raised his eyebrows with a sudden insight and began moving methodically from window to window on the first story. Some of the windows were unlocked. Stan could have climbed in and found him. But he hadn't, and, for a moment, Tommy was crushed. But upon reflection, Stan's failure confirmed Tommy's resolve to make it impossible to reach him.

Two women are brutally murdered in our community. I sleep in late one day, and a fellow comes up to my bedroom window. It's warm and the window is open. He gives the last name of Timmons and begins describing the murders in grisly detail, and I worry that he is the murderer. He tells me how to catch the killer, that he will set a trap of another woman, and then call the police. I can see that his intention is to entrap me, and since I know things only the killer would know—I would appear to be him. Horrified, I have to take action. A friend of mine comes to visit, and when the other Timmons goes to the bathroom, I tell my friend what to do. When this Timmons returns, my friend grabs him from behind and pins his arms. But the man slips away, pulls out a gun and points it at me. My friend wrestles the gun away. The other Timmons suddenly collapses into a chair, strangely exhausted by the brief struggle. We tie him up, and my friend calls the police, but we are afraid of them.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

A bell tower.

Chapter 13
As If From Fire

When Tommy went to survey the abortion clinic neighborhood in early December to find exactly how he would take revenge on Ponder, he saw a likely unobstructed line between a stately bell tower of a nearby church and the back parking lot of the abortion clinic where Ponder would enter. This was the same church with the courtyard where he had hidden after breaking the abortion center's window. Ornamental trees and short buildings stood between the church and the center, but the tower might well present a view over the obstacles. The day after his initial surveillance, posing as a woman researching the architectural history of the city, he called the church office. The secretary agreed to give him a tour that afternoon and Tommy arrived in a convincing female getup. They walked over the property and Tommy took photographs and asked dozens of questions. He learned the facts that he sought, such as how to reach the top of the tower—the secretary did not care if he saw where the key to the tower was hidden—and he found a suitable place where he could hide later.

This particular church was of moderate size. A handful of the faithful built it 80 years ago as the neighborhood began to grow. Over time, primarily in the 1950s, the parent denomination abandoned its traditional beliefs and the young people faded away. Now the church body was largely made up of discontented gray-headed women whose estranged children had not married, a few husbands, and a few young families with children who delighted in attentions showered upon them by the grandchild-starved older people. People of the local community had never heard of the congregation because it never made the news. The pastor was more theologically figurative than the congregation, but he was gracious and did not openly attempt to disillusion anyone.

No pastor here, past or present, had ever preached on reproductive choice, pro or con. However, not long ago, a young single woman who had two children by different fathers came to the office seeking guidance. She had hoped the pastor would give her reasons for breaking her appointment at the nearby abortion place. She also hoped he would provide assistance for her overdue water bill. She asked him, "Will God forgive me if I abort this baby?" The pastor winced at the question and replied in soft tones, "Dear sister, you should be asking, will God forgive you if you don't?" He wrote her a personal check for $200 and the woman went away sorrowful.

On Friday evening after Tommy's surveillance, the church held a prayer meeting regarding events around the world. War and famine engulfed several regions at once. There were anti-tax protests within the United States and people had been hurt in clashes with police. Tommy arrived late to the meeting, wearing scant touches of disguise that nevertheless changed his appearance, and afterwards, as people were leaving, he went forward and knelt at the altar as if praying.

One of the ushers walked up and said, "Are you alright, sir?"

Tommy raised his head, offered a slight smile, and nodded.

The usher said, "We will be locking up in a few minutes."

"Thank you," Tommy whispered. "I'll be leaving soon."

He listened for the steps of the usher to recede and he stood up. Turning around reverently—keeping his neck and back stiff—he saw for certain that he was the only person in the room, then he walked behind the pipe organ and slipped into a closet there. After all was dark and quiet, he waited another hour, taped the catch of an exterior side door so that it would remain unlocked, and left through the courtyard. He spent the remainder of the night in a sleeping bag under the camper shell of his pickup truck that was parked several blocks away. Jogging in a running suit as he pushed a three-wheeled baby cart before him, he returned to the church prior to dawn.

+ + +

Talus Schenk's coveted summer theater internship had extended into the fall; he decided to delay starting graduate school, and the fraternity had voted to allow him to remain in residence.

However, the internship was not going well; because of his lack of focus, he was given laborious offstage jobs and had only won insignificant parts.

While he sat alone in his room late on Friday night—the same night Tommy attended the prayer meeting—Schenk felt he needed a change. He decided to quit his security work at Ponder's clinic at the end of the year; he would work through Christmas and New Year's and quit. Schenk did not need the money because he had saved much of the "bonus" from last spring, and the extra that Ponder paid for giving up these important holidays would give him a boost. Though Schenk was becoming nervous about his own safety at the clinic, what finally convinced him to quit were coinciding emotional problems requiring a physical heuristic. He felt guilty about his part in the premature passing of Beth Telford and about his failure to be a father to his own child. Added to these pressing weights was a recent rendezvous with the young Mrs. Barbara Ponder that turned sour. When he had expressed doubts about voluntarily giving money to the mother of his son, Barb said, "I want a man, not a toy poodle. You're a baby, Tal."

About the Telford girl—when she died he could not stop thinking about her and his thoughts were a mixture of guilt, horror, and lust, which disgusted him, but the combination also possessed him like an addictive drug. The finality of death frightened, but fascinated him, too. He kept imagining her body lying in the grave, inanimate, and then he thought about her when she was warm and moving. With this imagery, his thoughts would turn against himself in abhorrence. He tried to mourn, but it hurt so much that he forcefully shut the reaction down, or tried to. He could not sleep for thinking about her.

His only escape, he thought, was to run from the surroundings evoking her memory. He decided to follow through on his dreams—to move to southern California. He knew that he had lost the confidence required to sustain a character through live hours of a play, but films would suit his abilities. Possibly, daytime dramas. Then there was his son. He remembered the Telford girl asking him about the baby when he gave her the fake birth control pills and he imagined what his child would be like now, at six months of age. Schenk now wanted to see his baby

and hug him. He yearned to watch him grow up into a boy—and he wanted to play football together, and buy ice cream cones, as his own father had done when Talus was little, before his parents had abandoned him to boarding schools. He wanted to apologize to Sarah Timmons for . . . for his failures, but she would reject him, probably, and this would damage him in his sensitive condition. That was another reason to get away from the Northwest—to be away from her. Tomorrow, he would tell Ponder he was leaving Portland even sooner. He would not wait for the year end after all—tomorrow would be his last day. Why not? And now he must go to bed early so as to arise early enough to arrive at the clinic before it opened. Surely he would find success in California because he was handsome, charming, and talented, and he had a little money. And whatever happened, when he turned 32, his trust fund would kick in.

Life would be easy then.

† † †

On Saturday morning, Dr. Mark Ponder decided upon a little-used route to work—one taking him a roundabout way through rural areas. He trusted these sudden intuitions because they randomized his actions, making it harder for a terrorist to predict his movements. When Ponder approached a tunnel that passed both under the railroad and Interstate-5, where the tracks and freeway traveled adjacently, he noticed the derelict flatbed truck parked parallel to the embankment. When it came within his close purview, he registered it as a low percentage hazard. He felt assured seeing the glowing orange sheriff's department sticker on the truck's window.

The tunnel was wide at the top and narrower at the bottom—like an inverted trapezoid, and full of light so that Ponder never felt constrained or fearful using it once every few months. Neither his new private security consultant nor the FBI Agent assigned to him liked it, but that's why they were paid—to advise him of every contingency so he could be prepared.

The danger had not risen yet to where Ponder needed to have an armed guard while traveling, but he carried his beloved ornamented Beretta .40 caliber pistol. It rested, indenting the leather, on the seat beside him.

His gray BMW crept into the underpass because of the pot-holed pavement, but suddenly Ponder's heart leaped and his breathing accelerated**.** Directly in front of him, at the far end of the Interstate tunnel, a tractor-trailer truck rolled across his path, blocking the road. Ponder glanced at his pistol. He looked up again and saw that it would be impossible to go around the truck. On the left was a ditch and on the right side . . . He did not have the concentration to look for more details. He swung the BMW right and noticed his car moved sluggishly. His brain knew that all four tires had somehow been flattened, but with fear taking over, he did not have room for this information in his conscious mind. Wrenching the wheel left, he slogged into a tight 180-degree turn. Then he lurched to a halt because he now saw that the dead flatbed truck had come to life and blocked the road at the other end of the underpass. Beside it sat an SUV-like vehicle—dark, and nearly invisible. Ponder now felt panic, and suppressed an urge to attempt crashing through the barricading truck.

He imagined glass shattering and a dull pain—a solid, rude tap against his head, sickening gurgling in his ears—a fatal bullet and deceased consciousness. But he was still alive and unhurt. He fumbled for his phone and unlocked and pushed the red button for 911. Pause. Nothing. He repeated. No ring. He fought panic again when he began to mash the digits one at a time and realized there had been no signal—no connection.

Time crawled as if wounded, and Ponder evaluated his circumstances. Several persons stood facing him. They wore dark street clothes, and the nearest persons seemed weirdly distorted—out of focus. Later, he would learn that they were holding transparent bulletproof shields. He revved the BMW engine to attempt to run over his attackers, but the car only rose a few inches and would not go forward.

The roof of his BMW popped downward in a wide bubble: someone was on top of his car. Ponder reached for his pistol and chambered a round of ammunition. He considered then rejected the impulse to shoot the overhead attacker through the roof because of the armoring he had recently installed.

"Damn it!"

He rolled down the driver-side window a few inches, raised the weapon over his head and snapped several rapid rounds toward one of the figures as the explosions and smoke from his gun stunned him in this confined compartment. The world fell dumb, except for roaring in his ears, and his eyes smarted, so that with rubbing them and blinking he did not know how everything had become dark. He became aware of an appalling echo of what might have been a huge helicopter flying overhead. The reverberation gradually faded. He rolled the window up tight.

He now had almost no fight left. Everything had defeated him, and he began to acquire an objective perspective of his situation. The attackers had thrown an opaque, black tarp over his car, covering the windows. He could see his steering wheel by the dim light leaking around the edges of the tarp. He was surprised to be alive—his security consultant had only mentioned abduction as a very remote possibility—and no preparation for afterwards had been discussed.

Ponder found the inside light switch. He ejected his partially emptied magazine and loaded a full clip, then, panting hard and dropping shells over and over, he reloaded the partly spent one. Thirty seconds passed. He could feel and hear his car's hood being violently forced open. The engine shut down and the overhead light bulb died. His heart pounded and it hurt, and rapid breathing flushed his blood with oxygen until he felt faint, but abject panic was gone. Maybe there was a chance of living if he surrendered. He shouted, "I give up! I give up!" and he threw the gun onto the floor.

He waited.

Soon he heard inorganic whining and metallic grinding on both sides of the car. The grinding increased suddenly as drill bits popped through, and high-pressure gas began hissing around the Kevlar armoring into the car's interior. He frantically searched for a hole to plug. They were trying to poison and kill him. Then all at once he sat back and laughed bitterly as he recognized the familiar sweet smell of nitrous oxide.

Ponder passed into a reposed state as he felt his car lifting from the rear and moving backwards. He barely heard the roar of the diesel engine behind him. The rocking of the trailer was soothing. The door of his car being removed did not trouble

him. He swam up from deep relaxation; the lights came up, and grave faces helped him from his car onto a bed attached to the inside wall of the trailer. Then he felt the mask and a delicious oxygen breeze, while the truck rumbled along to somewhere.

A young man with a 26-hour beard knelt beside him. "Mark Ponder, we have placed you under arrest. You are charged with murder and crimes against humanity. Anything you say may be held against you. You have a right to be silent. You have a right to an attorney. Do you have any questions at this time?"

† † †

The team of operators who remained behind at the underpass scrubbed the arrest scene of everything out of sorts and tossed the chocks that had immobilized Ponder's car into a midnight-blue Suburban. They searched for bullet damage in the nearest concrete pillars and found none, but they patched impact craters in concrete further away. The old flatbed truck had never stayed long. The Suburban pulled away. Three minutes passed while birds sang, the wind blew through old cattails in a ditch nearby, and creosote fumes shimmered off of the railroad ties above. Cars swished and trucks roared along the freeway. A BMW approached on the narrow road below, following Ponder's precise trail. The car was the exact make, model, and color of Ponder's and it bore his license plates. In the driver's seat sat a human replica of Dr. Ponder, convincing if seen from twenty feet away, or from a mediocre photograph. The car passed under the railroad bridge and the interstate, mindful of the potholes. It came to an intersection and turned left, paralleling the freeway a few miles. Turning right, it drove through neighborhoods of an increasing number of houses until reaching a north-south four-lane highway at a busy intersection. The car proceeded to the medical/legal business section where Ponder's clinic was located. The pseudo-Ponder passed in front of his clinic and waved to the security guard, Talus Schenk, who stood at the front door. Schenk waved back with a puzzled look on his face. The imposter held up a cell phone and shook his head, then tapped his wristwatch with his right forefinger. Schenk waved again and nodded once, showing understanding—or complete

misunderstanding—of the situation, and the fake Ponder returned an inscrutable thumbs-up and passed by.

The pseudo-Ponder returned to the busy commercial strip a few blocks away and drove up to a fast-food window and bought an early lunch. A police car went around him through the parking lot, and the officer, who knew Ponder by sight, gave a curt flip of his hand. Next, the pseudo-Ponder zipped across the road to a branch of Ponder's bank and withdrew the maximum amount in cash from the ATM. He withdrew several times more until he reached the limit of withdrawals, and he headed north on Interstate 5, keeping the speed limit, and eating his sandwich.

Less than six hours later, he crossed into Canada and disappeared, carrying the substantial reserve of cash.

By then, the authorities in Vancouver, Washington knew that Ponder had not reported for work and could not be found—he had disabled his GPS locator in his car—and it took them another four hours to discover that, if they wanted to find him, they needed to begin searching in British Columbia.

+ + +

This same morning, as the real Dr. Mark Ponder was being abducted a few miles away, Tommy waited, draped in a dark cloak, on the bell tower of the church. The square tower, topped with a pyramidal peak, had open arches on all four sides repeating the theme of the stained glass window frames below; the openings of the tower arches were screened by wide gauge steel mesh to keep out pigeons. With binoculars, Tommy peered through the ivy that grew partly over the screen. He kept bumping his elbow against the bell, and it vibrated low. The tower was not especially high, but Tommy had a view of the back entrance and a section of the street in front of the abortion building. As he waited, his mind seemed calm; only his body core shimmied as if from electricity. He hoped nothing would keep Ponder from his personal appointment with death. Tommy held out his right hand and it was not shaking. He did not know what in him was unsettled.

Lines from his Macduff part came to mind, and he whispered them as a prayer. "Tyrant, show thy face! If thou be'est slain

and with no stroke of mine, my wife and . . . child's ghosts will haunt me still, and forever."

A dozen minutes later Tommy caught the motion of the gray BMW, and he stiffened. And now he gloated that his prey was within reach. He watched the Ponder masquerader drive past the front of the abortion place. Tommy waited for this Ponder to turn the corner and come around to the back, to the entrance for the staff as he had expected, which would give him the clearest shot. He flashed with anger and the major muscles in his body contracted in frustration when the car kept straight on down the road and moved from sight. Tommy relaxed again. "He'll return in a few minutes," he whispered. He kept the barrel of the rifle down. Once, when a presidential candidate came to Portland, Tommy had attended a rally at a downtown square. He watched the silhouettes of Secret Service snipers on the rooftops, and from far below he could see rifle barrels pointing like black sticks to the heavens.

Time passed. Ponder was not coming. Maybe someone was standing in for him today. Maybe Ponder had returned and parked in front, against his habit. The opportunity had escaped. Tommy's intensity subsided and he wondered if he could again bring himself to the existential pitch required to kill a person.

He caught movement at the clinic and lifted his binoculars. A security guard paced along the side of the building with his fist to his ear. The guard's movement seemed familiar, and Tommy focused on the face. With a start, he dropped the binoculars from his eyes. He brought the lenses back up, and it *was* Talus Schenk. Tommy had strangely forgotten that Schenk worked here. A relentless process built up momentum inside Tommy—he hated the abortionist who had ended his joy, but here was another whom he hated more personally. Here was the bastard who had raped his best friend's sister. Here was the bastard who tried to force her to abort her baby. Here was the bastard, no, the vile, contemptible bugger, who gave Beth the abortion clinic referral that led to her death—and probably gave her the ineffective birth control pills. Beth had told him about them—not at first, because she was ashamed she had accepted and used them. And here was Schenk, in league with Ponder the murderer and acting as his protector.

Tommy's anger reached a flashpoint.

Without thought, on the impulsion of the unchecked forces within him, Tommy raised his rifle and targeted Schenk's head. He pushed the safety off and rested his finger on the trigger. Schenk had stopped by the back door. Tommy stayed with him. Schenk was now flirting with a solidly built woman with short hair—probably a lesbian. She wore a blaze-orange and radioactive-green vest and she was laughing, probably at one of Schenk's dirty jokes. Tommy took a deep breath, let it half out, and held.

It was his method—his technique—as an actor to imagine the desired reality before he acted—this is what made him effective on stage. This Tommy did in the seconds that followed. He felt the authoritative recoil of the rifle push against his shoulder. He looked for Schenk's head to jerk backwards; the wall behind became wet and dark. Tommy heard almost nothing, and little or no concussive blast had blown his eyebrows; the rifle's sound suppressor worked well. Schenk's body flopped onto the ground and rolled over. Tremors shook the body and he lay still. Nothing happened next. The woman gazed in horror, her hands on the sides of her face, her mouth wide in a scream.

While it was a natural step for Tommy to place Schenk's life within his power, the decision to kill Schenk was another decision, one Tommy had not yet made. He needed time to think. Tommy moved his finger off the trigger and looked out at the sky. He pushed down a dizzy sensation, which was his mind grabbing onto reality. He again looked through the scope.

Schenk, on his feet, waved his hand, and for an instant, Tommy thought he was waving to him, 200 yards away on the church tower. Was he only fantasizing that Schenk was alive?

No.

Tommy breathed in and out. He was relieved because if he killed Schenk now, Tommy would lose another opportunity to take Ponder. But if he found Schenk alone . . . He flicked the safety on, and moving like the second hand of a clock, he let the rifle down. He himself sank just enough so that he could still look over the parapet. A police patrol car pulled into the back parking lot. Another police vehicle—a dark pickup truck—pulled up. The officers conversed with Schenk, and a flowery-

dressed nurse emerged from the back door. They talked with dramatic animation and looked all around. There was trouble. Ponder gone missing, maybe?

Disappointed by the frustration of his purpose, Tommy disassembled his gun and packed it into a baby bag, but he held a new resolution. He climbed down through the tower and into the church reception room. He placed his baby bag on the back of the carriage, tucked his cloak under a pink blanket, and wheeled out the side door to the closed-in garden. The iron gate was open. Tommy negotiated the concrete steps down to the sidewalk, holding the front wheel into the air. He rounded the corner. Drivers passing by, if they noticed Tommy, would have registered nothing unordinary—he appeared only as a neighborhood dad taking his youngster for a run.

The church marquee facing the street boldly commanded the public to "PRAY FOR PEACE."

† † †

The next morning, Sunday, the newspapers said nothing about the disappearance of Dr. Mark Ponder, but they did report that a man walking his dogs during the previous evening had found Talus Schenk's body in north Vancouver—or, the dogs found the body—on a weedy vacant lot, a knife lying near the corpse. The police found a suicide note typed on Schenk's diminutive computer in his pocket.

All immediate appearances indicated that Schenk had cut his wrists and then finished his life by cutting his throat to the neck bone. The note raved and was enigmatic. There were extra, confusing tracks all around the site. After questioning the neighbors and members of Schenk's fraternity, and considering that the corpse lay on blood-soaked ground a few blocks from Ponder's clinic, police investigators began to suspect that the death was connected with Ponder's sudden departure. Decorated with gold, the bloodied knife bore an engraved dedication, "To Dr. Mark Ponder." This tidbit was dutifully leaked to the press, and the television stations jumped on the story, but nothing speculative about Schenk's death appeared in Monday's morning paper. By Monday evening, however, the two noteworthy events were publically linked, making national news.

When Beth's father, Mr. Telford, read Tuesday morning's newspaper, he finished his coddled eggs on toast, dressed carefully in his best suit and newest tie, and called a limousine for a ride to the Portland police administration building to turn himself in for murdering Talus Schenk. He told police where he had hidden the body on the campus of the University in Portland. In addition, he confessed to a bomb threat made to the abortion place. When the police asked about Ponder, Telford said, "If anything bad has happened to the bastard, I'm responsible for that, too." The police interrogated him respectfully for an hour, held him overnight in a comfortable room, and then suggesting that he find help for his delusions, they released him to go home.

Fagus grandifolia.

It is a sunny day under the open sky. A wooden floor rests on the ground. Some pretty young women, with long braided hair tied up on their heads, approach us to dance as we stand in the middle of the floor, but whenever they come near, their forms lose shape, dissolve into the air, then surround us like cloudy vapors. We can hear their voices. When they move away, they take their natural shapes again. Understanding, they stand off a few feet; the music begins and we watch them closely to learn the movements, a traditional German folk dance. Their lovely costumes are dominated by bright blue and white, with a pattern of sharp triangles woven into the fabric.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

The view south from Ecola State Park. 1994.

Chapter 14
The Immaculate Courtship

By the Friday afternoon after Beth's funeral, Stan was weary. Added to the energy-draining duties of teaching, he had in the previous seven days attended a challenging book discussion at the Sternes', was awakened in the middle of the night by an anonymous phone call, drove near the abortion clinic after a bomb threat, hiked Beacon Rock with Mindy and her brother, learned late Saturday night that Mindy's friend—Tommy's girlfriend—had died; he had been given an "assignment" to save a student from being expelled, took a wild airplane ride with Mindy's father, who gave him "permission" to court her, attended with Mindy a funeral led by a prophet-like priest, and last of all, he had received an invitation to join her family for dinner on this particular evening.

Stan left school soon after classes. When he reached his home, he toppled onto the couch, pushed off his shoes with his feet, and reveled in the relief of sweaty socks beginning to dry. Twenty minutes later he awoke. He still had plenty of time before he had to prepare for dinner at the Sternes', and so he took a brisk walk through neighborhoods and side streets near his house. He enjoyed how people kept their yards, the ingenious ways they made privacy with walls and hedges, the different flowers in bloom, and all the animals he encountered: birds, squirrels, cats, and the rest.

One yard troubled him. Against a chain link fence, there was an unpainted doghouse, and inside was a brown and white dog—a Boxer. When Stan had first walked by, the dog came through the gate to greet him, and the creature gamboled, snorted, slobbered, and licked Stan's hand. Stan patted him and the dog wiggled and twisted. Months had passed when Stan did not go that way, and in early spring he discovered that the dog had been chained to its house. This once happy animal now stayed in his shed and never got up to dance and chase. He was a prisoner—

an inarticulate package of boredom and misery. Stan thought he should sneak back some night and kidnap him. At least he could bring hotdogs and toss them to him, but so far he had forgotten.

After the walk, Stan showered, dressed, and drove the eight miles or so to the Sterne residence—the odometer of his old Chevy did not work. Riding in this car was like being at the head of his own parade: people looked up, smiled, and waved, and often intimidating newer vehicles, itching to pass, rode behind his bumper. Stan ignored this rudeness, this speed insanity. "How can people live this way?" he wondered, but this evening he was not much annoyed. Neither the irritation nor the nervous elevation in his heart rate could interfere with the immense well-being cradling him.

As always, at the Sterne house Stan parked along the street on the hill and climbed the steps to a side door, the one primarily used by the family. The door was open. He was early. Children ran in and out in front of him laughing, and he heard his name shouted inside. A young girl—one of the twins—greeted him and offered her hand, "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Timmons. I am Isadore Christina. Won't you take a seat on the deck? My mother will join you in a moment."

Stan settled into one among several comfortable seats drawn up into a semi-circle around a steel table. The brilliant sky, filled with red-tinted marshmallow clouds over the Columbia River, awed him anew: an ever-changing skyscape afforded by the Pacific Ocean. Planes floated in and out of the airport across the water. Mt. Hood in the east veiled itself in gray and white.

After a short while, Mrs. Sterne came outside and Stan rose. Mrs. Sterne was dressed in themes of black and brown with rich patterns. She wore a fashionable outdoors catalog jacket. Her sharp intellect and bluntness always intimidated Stan, though her graciousness ameliorated this effect.

"Please, let's sit and talk," she said warmly. "You have come and gone, and we've never had a real conversation. We have so much enjoyed knowing your sister."

Stan believed it was Sarah who was responsible for the welcoming reception they gave him in this household. "This has been a wonderful place for her, Mrs. Sterne."

"How was your day? Do you enjoy teaching?"

"Teaching? It's always hard, but today was good. There are rare moments when the students—a few—get excited about literature and language. But only part of teaching is about the subject matter. More than anything, it's about relationships. That's what I don't like, because there are so many problems. I only have the students an hour a day and in drama activities. The best I can provide is a life-preserver they can swim to, if they choose."

Mindy now appeared, bearing a tray holding a pitcher of juice, glasses, decorative paper plates, and a nut assortment in a dish. She wore a blue print dress covered by an apron dusted in flour. Her long hair was tied up in braids behind her head.

"Sorry for looking a mess," she said cheerily with no apology intended. "We're baking pizza pies."

Uncomfortable talking with Mrs. Sterne, Stan asked, "You want some help?"

"Oh, no, Sarah and I are fine. We're about to put the pizzas in the oven."

Stan tried not to watch her as she lilted around the corner into the house, while Mrs. Sterne said, "Well, Mr. Timmons, you're an English teacher, and I suppose you like to read. What interests you, especially?"

Stan considered before he spoke. He talked fluidly before his students, but he never had a ready answer to questions like these. He was always rethinking his ideas; they were in continuous motion, and the pause was necessary to rejoin the creative process in his head.

"There isn't only one genre I enjoy . . . What fascinates me are stories, in fiction or true life, about ordinary people who are dropped into extraordinary circumstances. I'm not interested in super men and women, because they're not real. Nor am I attracted to plain, everyday life stories—like mine. That's why I'm drawn to Mindy. She's different from any other girl I have met. Heroic and—"

Stan had become so engaged in searching his mind that he forgot where he was and had begun talking to himself. Flummoxed, he looked into the distance, his eyes fluttering behind his glasses.

Mrs. Sterne had pity on him. "Yes, she's a special girl and we love her very much. Let me tell you a story."

The evening was growing cool. Mrs. Sterne pulled a shawl from the back of the chair, draped it over her shoulders and plucked it into place. "I'm not sure if Mindy told you, but my near ancestors were German Jews who married and started families in the mid-1930s. You understand what this means? Many of Mindy's relatives were murdered in the Nazi death camps. Their stories worked a powerful effect upon our family. Think, for example, of the State of Israel's motto regarding the Holocaust: "Never Again." It's deep in Mindy's character—a desire to fight injustice. Her brothers, too. And her father's family also is German; ironically, most of them had been ardent Nazis and soldiers. But not all were Nazis. Some resisted them, and some were rescuers of Jews, one even named to Yad Vashem, the museum, as Righteous Among the Nations. If you like, someday we can show you the documents and pictures from when we last traveled to Israel."

"I'd like to see them," Stan said quietly.

Mrs. Sterne continued. "But the story I'm going to tell you also is most amazing, and you'll find it worthwhile to hear. Three years ago, in January, we took the family to Washington, D.C. It was wintry, and there were not the usual crowds. We spent a day at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. There was a mural of photographs titled, "Prisoners of the Lagers." The faces were rugged and dark, with unsmooth angles and grizzled cheeks. Their eyes strained, they glanced to the side of the camera. They wore the gray-striped uniforms you expect. Each had a front facial shot and two side views. But in the middle of the display was a different face. Her hair was long and braided, and blond, her features smooth. She wore no uniform. She had not a drop of Jewish, Polish, or any other "Untermenschen" blood in her. She was the perfect Aryan female. She looked straight at the camera, fearlessly, calmly. No, she was gazing at me—the effect of the photograph. And her appearance . . . she looked exactly like my then-17-year-old daughter, Mindy. It was uncanny, as if she was alive in the picture and knew I was there in the museum watching her. I said to her, to the photograph, 'What did you do to be arrested, dear?'

"A month afterward I wrote to the curator—a person Mr. Sterne knows—and asked him to tell me about that photograph. He researched it with an archivist and said no one knew the name of the girl, but he told me the picture was made at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The curator kindly sent me a print of the photograph. I . . . I have it here." Mrs. Sterne had at her feet a folder, which she now lifted to Stan.

What he saw when he opened the folder disturbed Stan to his depths. Unless he had been told otherwise, he would have been certain this was Mindy. Her features seemed identical, but there was more. The steady gaze pitied him for being weak. Her eyes defied all evil. For the photographer they bore pity for his indifferent cruelty. They said to the slavemasters, "You may ravage and kill my body, but you shall not touch my soul!" To Stan, her eyes invited him to follow her through fleeting fires of torment to a glorious immortality. Her eyes showed no doubt about life after death. After beholding the unthinkable death around her, she was certain that evil's sublime arrogance would blow away in a puff of wind. But as for how the death of death would take place, her vision appeared to be unclear, blurry from fatigue and putrid smokes and snowing ashes.

Stan shuddered at this imagining. Blinking hard, he handed the photo to Mrs. Sterne.

"I felt the same way, Stan, when I first saw it in the display with those other portraits. We don't know how we will act when we have to choose between remaining human, or losing our humanity to live longer or more comfortably.

"One of my great-grandmothers, then 19, and my great-grandfather, who was 24, were Zionists. They were murdered in the concentration camp, but their little girl, a newborn baby—my grandmother—was hidden before their arrest, and the child smuggled out of danger by a young woman. We also know that the smuggler was Mr. Sterne's great-aunt (on his mother's side) who had joined an underground movement. Though we do not have absolute proof, I believe that the young woman in this photograph is the aunt. This girl in the photo, according to the curator, was caught in mid-1941 for some infraction of Nazi law, before the liquidation of the Polish ghettos began and the mass exterminations. Aryan though she was, she was thrown into the

Auschwitz complex to labor under conditions of starvation and disease. Because she entered the camp from the regular penal system, she was hanged or shot and not gassed, but her body, no doubt, was incinerated."

Stan remained silent through the long pause that followed. He was thinking that he had never before experienced such a necessity—to risk one's life to save another.

As if answering his thought, Mrs. Sterne continued. "Each of us encounters this girl's choice every day of our lives, in small ways, seemingly, and if the world dives down into madness such as that of the Nazis in Europe, we either will join the evil, or fight evil. If we have been making the small human decisions all along, then we might be ready. The slide into inhumanity does not come in one sudden dramatic fall, but incrementally, while each small slip passes unnoted."

Mrs. Sterne's voice took on a new note, urgent and higher. "See the signs, Stan. When humans are treated as animals—worse than animals—you'll know that the choice is before you. The illusion of neutrality is dispelled."

Had she not appeared to be so reasonable, Stan might have thought Mrs. Sterne was off-balance. Surely another horror like the Holocaust could never occur today—not in this country. What could she be talking about? North Korea? Africa? Stan knew that this conversation was not a hypothetical intellectual debate. He knew not how, but Mrs. Sterne spoke from personal knowledge. She guided herself by beacons invisible to him.

She went on. "Many young people today are like Hitler Youth. They have inculcated the belief that certain classes of human beings are not worthy to live—that they may be killed without guilt or remorse. These young people are not innocent, and yet they, too, are victims of our death-loving culture. I'm thinking of the poor Telford girl. Even worse, those repulsed by the murder feel, nevertheless, that they have no duty to intervene."

Stan felt awkward, not knowing how to move the conversation away from difficulty.

"What do you make of my ideas, Mr. Timmons? Are they in tune with your interests in man's universal condition? For every man, including you, Mr. Timmons, is in the extra-ordinary circumstance of being alive!"

Under this sudden assault, Stan inexplicably hearkened back to a job interview he endured when he was in high school, and he decided to share this story to gain a moment to think.

He softly cleared his throat. "I applied for a summer job once in a grocery store, and the store manager humiliated me by revealing my ignorance of the grocer business. But at the end of the interview, he asked me what my goal would be if I got this job. I was naïve, I guess, but I said, 'To make this the best store in the entire Safeway chain!' That might have turned things around, because I got the job, and the manager teased me about my statement for as long as I worked there—"

Stan stopped. It was a stupid anecdote. He considered if he should tell more about the grocery job, about how he had been fired for refusing to betray the confidence of a fellow worker.

Watching him closely, but not without kindness, Mrs. Sterne seemed to be probing his character, perhaps even his subconscious. His thinking out loud had helped him. He now knew how to answer her insinuation that he, Stan Timmons, had known precious little of life's realities.

"I think, Mrs. Sterne, you are asking whether each of us will pick up a hammer and drive the spikes into God's hands and feet, or will we lie down on a cross beside him."

Mrs. Sterne now waited with her hands before her face, her palms together and fingers interlaced, index fingers pointed up. She leaned forward. "And which are you, Mr. Timmons?"

"Holding a hammer, and far from willing to give up my life."

Mrs. Sterne smiled. "We should not seek martyrdom, Mr. Timmons, but neither should we shirk it. A saint's first quality is truthfulness. But marriage and children will teach self-sacrifice." Mindy had walked up and stood still, not interrupting. "Here's my eldest daughter. The pizza will be ready. Oh, and I forgot to mention. Jewishness is passed from mother to daughter. That means Mindy is Jewish, which explains why she's an excellent cook!"

Dr. Sterne, and Anselm and Bernard—the older sons—were absent, and supper was informal, and no one lingered around the dining table, except Stan and Chryseis Katherine, a twin, who challenged Stan to a chess game. The competitors played at a corner of the table, while Mrs. Sterne cleaned the kitchen, and

Mindy, Sarah, and the other children sang and thumped on the baby grand piano in the parlor. When Chryseis set up her pieces, she had her King in the Queen's place. She reached over the board and switched Stan's pieces into the same scheme.

"Ah . . . That's wrong," Stan said. "Queen on her own color."

"But I prefer this. It's the same game, because the King has the Queen's moves and the Queen the King's. The King should be the most powerful piece. He protects the Queen, instead of hiding behind the other pieces. He can die, too, and be removed from the board."

The girl had Stan two pawns down early, but she made an unsound knight sacrifice, could not make good her attack and resigned a few moves later. She challenged Stan to a rematch, but he laughed and said it would have to be another day. Mrs. Sterne, who had been following the game's progress, concurred. "I think you should give Mr. Timmons a break."

Stan and Chryseis joined the merriment in the parlor until the younger children were told to prepare for bed. They scrambled upstairs and Mindy invited Stan outside to the deck. They donned jackets and gloves against the chill late-September night air, and Mindy put on a stocking hat.

At last, they were alone and it was dark, except for a nearby street lamp. They scooted chairs up to the railing to watch the airport lights. Stan sat down and Mindy almost did, but then she straightened up and said, "Wait a minute, I'll be right back."

She was gone a short while, and the street lamp blinked and extinguished.

Mindy returned. "Now we can see the night and not feel like we're under search lights."

There was another pause, neither knowing what to say, and neither anxious to fabricate talk. But that afforded an opening to Stan. "I like to sit and be quiet," he said. "All day long while teaching, I talk on and on, but in my free time, or with friends, I'm usually quiet."

"I am, too."

"Your mom told me about your heritage, about the Nazi and Jewish background."

"She did?" Mindy sounded surprised. "She never tells anybody. Most people aren't interested, or they wouldn't appreciate it, because it's so far outside their experience."

"I thought it was incredible."

There was a long pause, but neither Mindy nor Stan was uncomfortable.

Stan broke the silence again. "I was wondering how your parents selected names for your brothers and sisters. They're . . . not common ones."

"Well, my father believes names are not selected, but are given. Basically, they are family names and Bible names, or names of someone Dad admired. But you're right; trendy names are far from his thinking."

"Hmmm. Where does 'Mindy' come from?"

"Actually, my name is Wilhelmina. It means 'Resolute Protector' in Old German."

"Really? How did they get from Wilhelmina to Mindy?"

"When I was born, Grandma Sterne said Wilhelmina was too big a name for such a little baby and she named me Mindy, and it's been that ever since. My middle name is Evelyn, which is a combination of Eve and Lynn. What does Stanley mean?"

"Probably not much."

"I'll find out for you. We have a book."

"Will later be okay?"

"Sure."

Stan became aware of being relaxed. After the rich meal and cheerful singing, he had put away all cares, and it was enough to be in Mindy's presence now, whatever the future might be. He remembered putting his arm around her at the funeral. But as soon as Stan focused upon the contentment surrounding him, it stole away. It was not truly quiet outside on the deck; he became aware of the rumble from the highway traffic a few blocks behind them, and when he reminded himself why he had come to the Sternes' tonight, his spirit quailed.

Stan stood and walked to the corner of the deck. He glanced back at Mindy, and she too had risen, but appeared to not have observed his anxiety. Her countenance, facing the sky, wore a serene expression. What did Mrs. Sterne say about fully human decisions? He realized that the entire evening directed him to do

what he feared, and it was better to launch out than to lose a blessed future. He walked back over to Mindy, who waited. He would speak his heart.

"Mindy," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Mindy, may I take your hand?"

He held out his hand. After a hesitation, she put her hand on his and turned to him.

"I love you and want you to be my wife," he said. "I've thought about you this way ever since we met eight months ago on our drive to Steilacoom hospital. I don't think I have any special insight from God, I only know my hopes, and if you don't share them, then I can only conclude I am mistaken. Will you allow me to spend time with you to learn if we should be husband and wife?"

Mindy withdrew her hand and took hold of the railing, but she did not move away.

Her voice was clear and untroubled. "Is this a proposal of marriage?"

Stan feared that he had said too much. "Uh . . . no."

"Good, because . . . it's too soon."

"It's a proposal of a proposal."

"I understand, and the answer to that is 'yes.' But provided you gain my father's permission to enter into a courtship relationship."

"I already have permission."

"You do?"

"He took me flying Monday over Mt. St. Helens."

"He did? He took you flying?"

"I thought he had spoken to you about me."

"No, except in asking about Sarah's family, and one other time. When I asked what he thought about you, he said . . ."

"What did he say?"

"Umm. Sure you want to hear?"

"I don't know, now. Maybe . . . not."

"Okay. He said . . . He said you were . . . He said you were normal. And honest."

"That's all? He said 'Normal'?"

"And honest."

Stan was baffled because he thought Dr. Sterne had done groundwork between Mindy and himself. Now it appeared Stan had jumped out on his own, except for the nudge from Sterne.

Stan was also insulted by the comment, but all he would say was, "I guess it doesn't matter."

"From him, it's a compliment," Mindy said gently. "But you men have been conspiring behind my back."

"I haven't been conspiring, except with myself for the last year. Your dad might be."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"Then, what's next? I don't know the courtship model, your version anyway."

"You've been doing rather well, but why don't you ask my father? He—"

"You're angry."

Mindy sighed. "No, really, I'm not. I'm just . . . You should talk to my father again. I'm sure he will want to discuss courtship and marriage in detail."

"But what about you? What do you feel, or think?"

"I . . . I feel as if I've been overprotected, and sometimes I'm not treated like a real person. But, I know I'm loved . . . by my family. Some people at college say that I'm Miss Perfect. They're wrong. It's just that I've been given so much."

"But what . . . do you . . . feel about me?" Stan felt that he was close to tears.

Mindy took Stan's hand this time. "I like you, Stan . . . as a friend. About marriage to you, or to anyone . . . I don't know. I don't know what I'm supposed to do in life, what my purpose is, exactly. I know what interests me and that I'm supposed to be in service somewhere, where there is real need. And I would rather be single all my life than marry the wrong person. Let's continue being friends. Don't be in a hurry. And I don't mind your intentions. You're transparent, but not a pushy kind of person. You have my consent to court me, if you wish. I'm open to what God has for me."

All Stan's romantic feelings, emotional vulnerability, and satisfaction evaporated the instant that the nearby street lamp clicked, buzzed alarmingly, and flashed on, illuminating the entire scene with its clinical glare. Mindy and Stan wheeled

around, and above them giggling issued from an open, upper-story window of the house.

"You'll *pay* for this!" Mindy shouted up, but she laughed and said to Stan, "I guess we should go inside."

Once Stan entered the house, there seemed nothing else for him to do. He said goodnight to Mrs. Sterne and gave Sarah a shoulder hug. She pushed away and winked at him. Mindy walked him to his car where she shook his hand with deliberate pressure. They arranged to meet later, and Stan left, incandescent. Mindy had consented to him courting her!

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On Saturday, Stan called Dr. Sterne, who was still not home, and left a message. He spent the day quietly, except for the inner tremors of exultation. On Sunday afternoon, he drove out to his parents' house for dinner. At the table, he reported to them about the developments with Mindy.

"I wanted to ask you, Dad and Mom, if it's okay to court her?"

Stan's dad and mom looked at one another wearing puzzled expressions. His dad cleared his throat and spoke with the mildest rebuke in his tone. Few people would have detected those notes, but the dutiful son did. Sarah would have heard them, too. While his mom nodded in agreement, his dad said, "We hope you will marry and have children before we are too old to enjoy them. This is good news. Stan, your mother and I trust your judgment. Just bring her to the house soon, because we are anxious to meet her."

Stan knew that his dad and mom were pleased beyond telling. They never missed an occasion to spur him on. Stan was amused by how, in this matter of his romantic life, his mom and dad were themselves like children.

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Dr. Sterne returned Stan's phone call on Sunday evening. When Stan said he wanted to learn more about courtship, Sterne invited him to another plane ride, but it had to be Monday afternoon again—the first of October.

On the way to school on Monday, Stan decided he would attempt to establish a rapport with this Bernardo Armentrout, the

student who was threatened with expulsion. Stan intended to invite him to a weekend movie night at his house along with other upper-class students, but Armentrout did not show up at school. Stan dropped by the principal's office after his final class to ask Mr. Cooper if he knew anything about Armentrout, but all Cooper would say was, "Armentrout officially withdrew from school on Friday last week. I don't know anything else, but if I find out, I'll tell you."

Stan passed it off as one of those things no one could ever explain. He returned to his room to work until quitting time, and after he drove home, he rode his bike to the airport.

After casual greetings, Dr. Sterne said that his mechanics had installed new avionics since Stan's flight the week before. Sterne tried to explain in detail, but Stan could only understand that they related to navigation and detection of other aircraft. After reaching cruising altitude and heading toward the south side of Mt. Hood, Sterne's resonant voice sat in Stan's ears. He spoke as if he were Stan's father, but said what his father would never say.

"Courtship is not dating, which is undefined—unless as a quasi-marital condition without a lifelong commitment. In contrast, courtship is to determine if a certain person is right for a husband or wife. Courtship should never go beyond the bounds of friendship, not even emotionally, except that all parties—including your parents and the girl's parents—know that it *could* lead to marriage. Courtship is a process of discovery. It allows you to get to know Mindy, and her you, within an environment of people who are important to you. In dating, when couples seek privacy, it's easy for a man or woman to charm each other, and when they become romantically and physically involved, the passion obscures the deeper characteristics of the other person. My belief runs against the current of our culture, but it's true: you can't build a lasting marriage relationship on romance, nor on physical pleasure.

"Maintaining a life-long relationship is dependent on kindness, patience, purity, courage and hard work. Women don't like to hear this, but for a man, romance diminishes when marriage begins. For men, romance is the chase, the tension, the mystery—well, that can occur after the wedding, too. For

women, romance means affection. Years ago I asked my wife to tell me what romance is. She didn't answer right away, then she said, 'A woman needs to know that she's special,' and I suggested: 'An act of thoughtfulness, a written note of appreciation, or a dinner evening together?' She said those indeed would be romantic instances. I asked, 'Would any of those be inappropriate for me to do with the children?' She said 'No' and thus I proved my point that for her romance meant simple affection. But enough theory for now. Do you have any thoughts about any of this?"

Stan had been listening intently as he looked out the side window. Sterne's voice sounded like a recorded message, and he was surprised when he was expected to reply. "Well . . . romance is . . . for men and women is . . . affection in the context of Eros, sexual love, and its ardent emotional attachment—the bond that's formed."

"Of course," Sterne said.

"This is good. All I'm thinking of is, uh, the practicalities . . ."

"Yes," said Sterne. "I'll be perfectly blunt. Consider these to be rules if you like, but I'll trust you to work out applications, and exceptions."

Stan pressed his forehead against the window to look at the distant clouds while he listened. Vibration in his head from the airplane drowned out Sterne's voice in the headset, and Stan pulled away slightly. Sterne had just begun explaining.

". . . kissing or handholding until there's a formal engagement. The best policy would be no touching until you are engaged, if that's to be, but I understand in folk dancing there's touching, but of a formal kind—supervised and governed. After engagement, I suppose a goodnight kiss is allowed, but it would be better not to do even this. I'm not sure where Mindy stands on this; it's more or less up to her and her betrothed young man.

"Next, you will not be spending time alone. There always will be a chaperone or other people nearby. This will be strict before a marriage engagement, and relaxed afterwards. You'll see that we often employ siblings as chaperones.

"Consider that, until you are finally married to a girl, she is not your wife. She could be someone else's future wife, because engagements can be broken, and you do not wish to defraud her.

Treat her how you would want someone else to treat the woman whom you will eventually marry. And by the way, how *are* you in the matter of sexual self-control?"

Up until now, Stan had taken all this well, mostly. He was annoyed, but it made sense to him, especially since he had, to some degree, been wounded in the past by the myth of romantic love. These seemingly archaic manners functioned as protection against what sought to destroy people. But this intimate question made him squirm tortuously. As with the first flight, he thought of bailing out of the plane. *Still no parachute*, he thought.

Dr. Sterne said, "No need to be specific."

Stan inhaled deeply once and twice and said, "Uh, I could do better. I sometimes, in the past, have succumbed to pornography, but uh . . . I've never bought it. I've had a few girlfriends. And I'm a virgin, if men are virgins."

"I understand," Sterne began in his impartial doctor's manner. "My life experience was similar and I found marriage a cure for temptation. The hard part is sublimating one's desires until then. All I shall say is, find someone to be a confessor and make yourself accountable. And the other advice is: flee sexual temptation. Avoid what gives you problems in this area. When you consider the worth of a fantasy compared to marriage, there's no comparison. Lust is a disease where pleasure is heightened by the sickness, perhaps. It burns and consumes you. On the other hand, a marital relationship is health and joy; it gives life—quite literally—in children. It requires self-control and discipline on occasion, the same as for an unmarried man when there's a temporary separation, or an enforced abstinence in the instance of illness or other occasions."

Sterne stopped talking momentarily and then asked, "Do you have any more thoughts or questions?"

Stan's thoughts ran, *Why is he so detached and impassive?* Out loud he said, "You've given rules about what to avoid, but you've not said what to do."

Sterne looked over to Stan and smiled. "That's where your own creativity comes into play!"

This was unexpected. The Sterne family exhibited contradictory extremes. On one end of the spectrum, there was

prudery and detachment, and on the other end, revelry and passionate delight in everything good and beautiful.

"If I'm formal and overly thorough sometimes," Sterne said, interpreting Stan's body language and his wide open eyes, "it's my personality and training, but it helps with the awkwardness."

They completed the aerial jaunt without acrobatics—only taking a distressingly closer view of Hood—and returned and landed the aircraft without further conversation. There was not much more to be said. Stan enjoyed not talking. Words were not always necessary for communication; rather, they often were obstacles. Dr. Sterne seemed to be sympathetic to this as they walked across the parking lot of the airport. He only said "Goodnight" and the two went their own ways.

+ + +

The courtship now began in earnest. Stan saw Mindy about once a week in addition to the monthly book discussions. He continued to have a full schedule at work; his free time remained leisurely and yet never as lonely as it had been before. They occasionally went for a walk on a weekend night around the neighborhood where she lived, a brother or sister in tow, and on Sundays, at intervals, Stan attended church with the family—a church Reformed in theology and Baptist in character.

One weekend, Stan cooked dinner for Mindy and her sister twins at his home. He spent the entire Saturday cleaning the house and preparing the food—a Chinese feast with trimmings, including chopsticks, which Mindy and her sisters handled deftly. There was a pork dish with tree-ear fungus and mushroom sauce, a vegetable dish, a glass of wine each—except for the twins—and Chinese cookies. On another Saturday, Stan joined the family for a workday on the Mollicoat Estate. They trimmed brush and branches growing along the road up to the Bluff House, and Stan helped dig manure and bedding from the horse stalls, while others picked up fallen apples in the orchard. After cleaning up and changing clothes, they all enjoyed supper watching the sunset from the balcony facing the coastal range. The Uchida children had been left in the Sterne family's care for the weekend, and their father, Dr. Bennett Uchida, the widower who liked Mindy, joined them during the evening. Stan noticed

that Bennett and Mindy spent time together in private conversation. Stan stayed overnight in one of the cabins, as did the Uchidas. In the afternoon after church, they all pressed cider from apples collected the day before. Being near the end of October, they did this in lieu of Halloween.

One odd aspect of the Sterne family emerged. With a few exceptions, Mindy's older brothers remained in the background. Part of this was because Mindy was so much in Stan's emotional view; another part was that the brothers were independent and busy elsewhere. But as his love for Mindy matured, he began to take more interest in her family members. Anselm, who was only a little younger than Mindy, was easy as a conversationalist, but the next younger brother, Bernard, always kept his distance from Stan. When Stan first saw Bernard, he had a feeling that he had met him before, but it was not until later that he saw his resemblance to the mysterious Bernardo who had dropped out of school. One day when Stan came to visit at the Columbia River house, he met Bernard leaving to play soccer, and on impulse he asked a crazy question.

"Were you ever in my English class?"

"Yeah, that was me," Bernard said without hesitation.

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Bernard? Bernardo?"

"Same name." Bernard smiled.

"But your last name is Armentrout, not Sterne."

"My father and mother met in Chile when my father was a grad student doing geological research. I was born there. My parents were killed in an accident. Dr. and Mrs. Sterne adopted me, and I came to live in the United States. I've kept my family name."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear of the loss of your parents. That wasn't very long ago, was it?"

"Six years."

"You don't have an accent."

"Not unless I want to."

Because Bernard and Stan both were sociable, from this time on Stan and Bernard began to grow closer. Bernard had in his

personality an exotic, potent mix of good humor and natural daring.

When Stan later asked him about "Bernardo's" troubles at school, Bernard looked at him quizzically, and then laughed. "Oh, you must mean my unruly behavior? I just didn't go along with the school's stupid rules, like the dress code. I wanted to wear my shirts untucked and things like that, and I skipped a few classes. Nothing big. Except I punched a bully when he insulted my mother. He called me 'son of a whore.' Punching him might have been a serious problem, except he was twice my size."

"So, did the Sternes withdraw you from the school?"

"No. Actually, it was my decision. I met a few remarkable students, but overall the school was boring as an educational institution. I prefer homeschooling."

"Was my class boring?"

"Uhh. Not really. Yours was the most interesting of them all. But it was too short. Just as things warmed up, we had to jet off to the next class."

"You didn't finish the semester. Why did you enroll in the first place?"

"For my education."

Stan was having trouble comprehending this. "Forgive me, but you enrolled for your education and then quit? How did quitting help your education?"

"I needed to move on. I learned what I sought to learn."

"And that was—?"

"How boring and demeaning the public schools are with their herd mentality and ghetto-style youth culture. Don't you understand? I went to the school to learn *about* the school. It was anthropological field observation."

Stan laughed, and thought Bernard had been joking, but as Bernard had said it with a straight face, Stan did not really know if Bernard was serious or just had a gift for comedy. And then it occurred to him that maybe it was Bernard who had left him the bright yellow envelope containing the photo of Beth's and Tommy's aborted baby.

† † †

In spending the hours with Mindy and the Sternes, Stan was happy beyond measuring. A word summarizing this family was "royalty," and he felt privileged to be in their presence, and yet they never made him feel out of place. The only disturbances to Stan's satisfaction came when he worried about competition from Uchida, of course, and when he felt bad about Tommy, whose image appeared in Stan's dreams.

When Beth had died—after her funeral—Stan tried to call Tommy, but Tommy never answered, nor did he return the calls. Stan sent notes in the mail and these came back with "Return to Sender" scribbled on the envelope. Stan had become busy with work and his growing relationship with Mindy, and he had let thoughts of Tommy go, but he suddenly realized something was wrong and after school on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving he decided to drive to Tommy's farm.

Stan did not know where the farm was located, but he had an address and a general idea, and when he drew near, he stopped at a grocery store. A shiny black 1940s Chevrolet panel truck sat across the street, near railroad tracks. Stan bought an ice cream sandwich and asked the grocer—a wiry hunchbacked man—if he knew the directions. The address meant nothing to the man and Stan tried the name, Duckwitz. The man rolled his head on his shoulders and drew a blank. Finally, Stan told about Tommy's grandparents who had recently been killed, and the grocer stopped moving his head and stared.

"The Shermans. A sad business. I miss them." He led Stan outside and down the weathered concrete steps to the road to orient himself; there he waved and pointed his arms while Stan made mental notes. The farm was only a few miles away.

Before the grocer returned inside, Stan said, "Nice truck."

The grocer stopped at the door, looked past Stan to his classic Chevrolet and replied, "Nice car." The grocer laughed, and the door with its peeling paint creaked closed before him.

Stan found the long driveway, knocked at the farmhouse, and kept at it, not waiting between knockings. He walked around to the back of the house. Tommy's pickup, covered in dust, was in the open garage. A huge woodpile stood outside the kitchen door with buckets of fragrant kindling, and the cows in the fields appeared to be healthy and had a bull running with them, but the

lawn was overgrown, and leaves overflowed the gutters of the house. Smelly garbage bags accumulated next to the pickup truck, but the fuchsias in the hanging baskets on the front porch were well-watered and fresh, as if they had been brought inside on frosty nights. The bird feeders hanging around the house were full of seed, but a large, partly-eaten dog lay rotting at the foot of a tree, the bones and skull having been stirred around. A frayed rope, once used by children as a swing, hung from a limb. It was a queer mix of death and life, decay, stench, and exuberant growth.

Stan walked up to the porch again. This time, he called Tommy's name as loud as he could. He looked in the windows and tried all the doors, and then he rang the iron triangle hanging outside the kitchen. Maybe Tommy was in the fields. Stan sat on the steps to wait awhile. A lactating cat approached, her teats protruding below her tummy fur. She rubbed along his legs, and purring, stood on her hind paws and wiped her drooling mouth on his hand. He pushed her away. Should he break into the house? What if Tommy was hiding inside? Stan always wondered if Tommy was deadly serious when he acted. Stan patted the cat, which made it slobber more, and he pushed it away again. Back at his car, he called one last time and honked the horn. Finally, he composed a short letter, left it inside the front screened door, and drove off.

Stan spent Thanksgiving with his family, and Mindy with hers, but in December the weekly visits resumed, including a six-month birthday party for Baby Guthrie at the Sternes' home.

† † †

Thus it went, until the Christmas season when the Sterne family planned to leave for a holiday in southern Chile. Uchida was to be there assisting Dr. Sterne, who had left early to prepare some volunteer mission work. The whole family anticipated staying until the end of January. Mindy was taking off her school's January term to be with her family during her last undergraduate year, since her future might lead her away from home. Sarah and the baby had been invited to join them for the holidays, to return after the first of the new year.

Stan saw Mindy one last time alone, after the final Friday book discussion group of the year. She was to leave the next day, a few days before Christmas.

Wind running up the river blew through the trees, making a gentle whisper on this cold night. Stan and Mindy walked down to the river alone—a chaperone not having been provided—and they strolled along a newly paved road leading to skeleton houses under construction. They climbed to the deck of an unfinished house and, facing the river, sat a few feet apart on a bench attached to the handrail. They leaned forward against the rail, dangled their legs over the side, and looked over water that reflected rippling wraiths of lights, whose origins glowed from the opposite banks.

Stan felt a compulsion to make a marriage proposal now. This was a memorable place to ask. He feared that Uchida stood ahead of him in line—Uchida undoubtedly was courting also—and Stan was aware that his own proposal would be premature, but he also was afraid he might be too late. Mindy was warm and cheerful with him, but she invariably maintained an emotional reserve. She did not require him or his attentions. He did not want her to be dependent upon him, but he needed companionship. He had adapted to a single life, but he was not a man who would fulfill his purpose in life alone. He needed the stability and camaraderie only marriage could supply. He forced away the impulse to pop the question.

"I . . . I wanted to give you this before you left: a Christmas present," Stan said. He took a small box from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Thank you. You want me to open it now?"

"Sure."

Mindy meticulously removed the ribbon and tape, folded the paper, and slipped the lid off from the box. She lifted out a blue cross on a gold chain.

"Beautiful," she exclaimed, holding it in her palm in the dim light of her phone. "Is this lapis lazuli?"

"No; it's glazed ceramic. My uncle made it, years ago. He made jewelry as a business for awhile. He's the one who gave me my car."

"This is a sweet present. Help me put it on. I don't ever wear jewelry unless it's a special gift from someone."

She scooted near him and turned around while Stan fastened the clasp behind her neck. She returned to her former place and hushed. The cold breeze suddenly strengthened and the trees tossed and thrashed their canopies with a sound like falling water.

"You're going away," he said. "Six weeks is a long time."

"Does it worry you?"

Thinking of Uchida, Stan asked, "Do you want an explanation?"

"Yes, and no," she said, tonally punctuating—high, then low—the opposing words.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd prefer that we not make any commitment now. I want to part as friends and trust God to direct our futures, yours and mine. We're going to be busy in Chile. I'm working for an English language radio station and helping Mom with the children. We're going to be exploring in the mountains, too, and I want to conduct interviews for my Communications Senior Project, and, well, we can write letters. You and I. Not on the Internet, please, but real letters."

"Yeah, right, write," Stan said dejectedly.

"Writing is wonderful!" Mindy said, contradicting his disparagement. "You can say things in words you can never find courage for in speech. Courage isn't the right word. I mean, more like . . . I'm trying to say, a person gives care and thought in letters because real written words on paper can last as long as the world does. That reminds me. I have a present . . ." She fished in her sweater pocket and withdrew a square envelope. ". . . for you. But I would rather you open this on Christmas."

"What is it?"

"Just wait. You'll see."

Whatever it might be, the gift from Mindy heartened him, and in this sudden mood, he wanted to hold her in his arms, pour out his heart, tell her he loved her, offer his invitation of marriage. But he had already received his answer without wasting the question. He took a deep breath and released it in a gust, his cheeks puffing out. Conscious that he and Mindy had never

been alone so long, he conceded to the nagging scruple that they should end their proscribed private conversation. He climbed out of the bench and said, "Let's go back."

"You know, we have protective rules, but they're not rigidly enforced—I mean, short of immorality. My parents trust me, and my dad trusts you more than I do." When she caught the dismay on Stan's face, she said, "I'm sorry. I'm just teasing."

Stan thought how trite Mindy's joke was.

"Don't worry about not having a chaperone," she said, chastened by his sudden sullenness. "I told Mom we were going for a walk and she said that was fine because we are leaving tomorrow. I'm sorry for the comment."

Mindy seemed to be unconcerned about returning, but Stan urged her, and once she began walking, they moved slowly. Their steps carried them toward the brightly-lit house, with their minds skipping past the fleeting present into an unknown future. He was happy being with Mindy, but he began to feel lonesome already. The searching wind blew through Stan's jacket, Mindy shivered and her teeth chattered. Stan wanted to take her arm, but refrained and they quickened their pace.

Stan wished Mrs. Sterne a good night and safe journey, shook Mindy's hand at the door and drove to his cold house, thinking he might have lost forever his chance to ask Mindy to marry him. She might return to the U.S. engaged to Uchida.

+ + +

Stan did not expect to hear from Mindy for four or five days—until after Christmas, at the earliest. He kept busy over the weekend gift shopping—and there were dozens of projects to complete. He exercised with push-ups and sit-ups to the music of Beethoven and one day he went for a walk, but he again forgot to bring hotdogs to his chained canine friend. He called the dog, which jumped at the end of his tether and barked plaintively. On Christmas Eve, Stan went to a midnight service at his church. The candlelight and incense were consoling, and he sang the carols with childlike ardor. The older woman in front of him afterwards turned and said, "You have a nice voice." He spent Christmas day with his parents: eating, and napping in front of the television. Later on, in the dim light and

damp evening air, he went on a walk around their neighborhood, visiting childhood haunts, and remembering adolescent adventures and mischief, like once when he took lumber from someone's neglected barn to build a tree house on the same property. That evening, he drove home, made hot chocolate, climbed into bed and opened Mindy's present.

The envelope contained a bookstore gift certificate representing for Stan a breathtaking amount of money. The envelope also held a letter folded into quarters and a tiny plastic bag containing a black obsidian arrow point. He put the letter aside, took out the artifact, and inspected the flaked edges under a magnifying glass that he kept at his bedside table. The point was perfect and sharp. Stan wondered at the person who fashioned it many hundred years ago—how this primitive man had such an appreciation for delicate beauty.

Now, for the letter! But first he drained the cocoa, got up to brush his teeth, and returned to bed.

His heart beating apprehensively, he pulled flat the two sheets of white textured paper. The letter was a hand-printed list of questions ranging in importance from trivial to ultimate—questions both personal and of an all-embracing magnitude. They reminded him of the conversation when he and Mindy first met driving to Steilacoom. He turned the pages over and inspected their backsides. They were blank. He put his nose close to the paper and breathed in a faint, jasmine-like fragrance.

With the refolded letter in his hand, Stan fell asleep thinking about how he would frame the answers, anticipating with pleasure the writing of them.

+ + +

Late December looked to be cold and damp, and the final days of the year short and depressing. During this time, Stan planned to ride his bike and work around his house and yard. The physical exertion would keep him from feeling blue, but it would not prevent lonesomeness. The day after Christmas, after his bike ride, he replaced a leaky faucet in the bathroom, spent a few hours at the bookstore at Vancouver Mall, and in the evening wrote the following letter:

December 26

Dear Mindy,

I suppose you are settled in now. I'm glad you want to write real mail. This is slower, but it creates a feeling of space. Christmas was, is, quiet this year. I'm enjoying time off from teaching, except I have to make lesson plans. I'm reading a book by Mark Twain now, one of his travel accounts. With the money you gave me, I bought a couple volumes of his works. They are cloth bound, sewn, with acid-free paper and a silk marker. At least I can travel through reading. What I like about Twain is his uncompromising honesty, including about himself as a representative of the human race. Even his exaggerations contain truth, and that's why he is so funny. I have placed an order for other volumes of Twain's writing, and that answers your question about my favorite author. Thank you for the present. You are so generous!

About the questions you sent me. They're a treasured gift, too, but I cannot say I enjoy them all, because I don't know the answers. It's easy to say I don't have a favorite color, but in a human-made environment, I like colors in the same proportion as they are found in nature.

My goals in life? I don't have any. Well, that's not exactly true. It's just that I have given up on some goals I once had. In college I developed aspirations for what I would accomplish as a teacher: an important one being to enlighten my students. But after a few years of teaching, I feel hopeless. In every class there are one or two students who have caught fire, but the rest are wet rags. The first year of teaching was hard. I worked 70 hours a week and most of the students were interested. But this year . . . Outside events and the decline of, well, I will say—cliché though it is—the decline of civilization have eviscerated the heart from most of these children and they act like street waifs. They're in survival mode, and the school has become either a jail

they wish to escape, or a sanctuary where they can safely socialize and sleep before heading back into the war.

Another goal. You asked, and here's my answer. I hope to find a wife and be married. You're thinking, "Oh, that subject again!" but you always have grace to not reprove me for my persistence. You are able to remain a friend, and your constancy is valuable to me. What do I pray for? My prayers about marriage have changed. Before I met you, I prayed, "Lord, give me a wife." And then, one day I realized that this was half of what was necessary, and my prayer changed to, "Lord, make me the man that the kind of woman I want to marry would want to marry." Does this make sense? And the next evolution of my prayers was to "Lord, give me *as* a husband." I will stop there for now on that subject. Well, no, because I'll say that I pray God will give me to *you* as a husband.

Spare time? I spend most of my time taking care of the basics. I have some married friends whose home I go to for dinner every other week. I'm not sure why I never mentioned this before. I need to introduce them to you. There's not much else to add.

I'll tackle one more question. What would I do with 10 million dollars? When I wake up in the morning, I sometimes imagine traveling the world in a hot air balloon. Not circumnavigating the earth, but drifting from place to place, floating above the strife. The balloon would be huge, filled with helium, and suspended below would be a wicker house, snug and comfortable . . . Well, that's a frivolous answer. I'd spend a million of it on a house and acreage with sunshine enough for a garden. If I had such a house, I would then travel the world and spend the interest from nine million where the human needs are the greatest and help is the scarcest. When weary, I would come home to rest for awhile. I'd like to write screenplays someday.

The other questions will wait until later. I imagine you are having fascinating experiences, and I can't wait to experience them through your senses and sentences.

Love, Stan.

P.S. I received a phone message from a police officer today. But don't worry—it can't be about me.

The next evening, Stan built a fire in the fireplace and wrote another letter, explaining his puzzling postscript.

December 27

Dear Mindy,

I couldn't wait for a letter from you before writing again. Talus Schenk was murdered last week. I can't believe that I hadn't heard about it already. I saw in the newspaper that Dr. Mark Ponder, the abortionist, had disappeared and there was a sordid business—a murder—connected with this, but it didn't dawn on me at the time that the victim might be someone I knew.

The police called me yesterday and made an appointment for earlier this morning. One officer arrived at the house in plainclothes. A detective. He was polite and asked me what I knew about Schenk's relationship with Ponder. I told him what I knew, which was only that Schenk worked as a security guard. The detective asked me if I knew anyone who might want to kill Schenk and I was nervous about this question because of our "visit"—Tommy Duckwitz's and my visit—with Schenk at his fraternity. Did I ever tell you about this? I told the detective that Schenk had "offended" Sarah a year ago in September and that a friend and I had "words" with him, but the detective didn't seem concerned. My guess is he had already heard stories like this about Schenk. Also, the detective seemed assured that I was not a person who would do violence against Schenk.

That's really horrible—the father of my nephew is *dead*! What relation was Schenk to me? Brother-in-Rape? Sorry. I despised the man. He needed a beating, maybe, but I never wished murder upon him. I wonder who did this. He likely had plenty of enemies. I don't know if I should tell Sarah. What do you think? What does your father think? Would she be able to handle it? Would it do her more harm if I waited, only for her to find out later and realize that we had withheld the information?

I feel I have ignored Sarah too much. She and the baby are due back from Chile next week and I am supposed to pick them up at the airport. I am taking her to dinner the following weekend. Sarah told me she might look for a part-time job nearby when you and your family return and she can leave the baby with your mom a few hours a day. Getting out would be good for her—I think she is ready to tackle the world again. I appreciate your family's support of her these past months.

For New Year's, I am going to a party at some friends' house, where I go every year. They are amazing people. Henry's an art teacher at my school.

Before the police detective arrived today, I planted tulip bulbs in a hand-dug bed in my yard—my mother gave me the bulbs for Christmas. After lunch I ran an extension cord outside and split firewood until dark while listening to classical music on the radio. I wish you were here with me, or that I was with you. I really want to travel someday.

Love, Stan

The day after New Year's, after school, Stan drove across the I-205 bridge to the Portland airport to meet Sarah and Guthrie. When they appeared in the luggage claim area, Stan saw Bennett Uchida and his children standing beside them. There was confusion on the part of Uchida, who assumed he would be driving Sarah to the Sterne residence, but this was cleared up.

Stan thanked him for his guardianship over his sister and nephew during the flight from Santiago. On the drive home, Stan plied her with questions, but she was tired and not willing to talk much. At their dinner date the following weekend, she described in detail the marvelous experiences she had had and the wonders of the exclusive resort where she spent her days in South America. Stan had hoped to hear more about Mindy, but was disappointed. The good part was that his fears about Uchida were allayed somewhat, because Uchida had returned sooner than Stan expected, and Stan greatly hoped for an interest developing between Sarah and the lonely widower.

Stan did not know if Sarah knew about Talus Schenk's fate—surely she would have mentioned it if she did—and he was afraid to tell her.

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Nearly two weeks later, a letter arrived in the mail from Mindy. Fastened to the paper by an invisible dab of glue was a small pressed flower.

Dear Stan,

Sorry for not writing sooner. It's been that busy, from morning until I wither at night.

It's terrible news about Schenk. I really never "met" him, but I saw him around and on campus, and heard stories, of course. He courted death. Sarah already knows about his murder. Dad and Mom told her. We talked about it a long time.

My Spanish has improved since we came here. A little exposure brings it back. The radio station work is not exciting, but I have enjoyed meeting the people who live in the mountains. They are generous and welcome us as members of their families. I take a translator because they speak an indigenous language (my translator did not speak English!) and I am preparing for broadcast some fascinating stories about their way of life. The native peoples face significant political/cultural oppression, and

I need to learn more. The music is especially intriguing and feral—I have made recordings. The land, too, is rugged and fierce. I wish I could drop everything and walk up and up into the mountains and live. The wildflowers are truly amazing! I have pictures to show you when I return. I have taken hundreds of photos of people and flowers and the mountains. My brothers have been hiking and climbing and I went on one jaunt with them up to almost 10,000 feet. The views were fantastic. The weather here is Spring.

I have not had to spend as much time looking after my siblings as I expected. When Sarah left—she has been an immense help—Dad hired a local governess to free me from those responsibilities. He has meetings here at the resort where we base our operations, and also he has spent some time at a rural clinic. In a few days—next week—we all are uniting to take a ferry excursion down to Puerto Natales, and from there we will be flying home. I had hoped to write more to you, but time has flown. I will talk with you more when I get home.

Love,

Mindy

Earlier, Stan had eagerly awaited this reply to his letters, but by the time it finally came, he had given up expectations of a correspondence with her. He left her other questions hanging. Once back into the teaching schedule, Stan was not as disgruntled at the brevity of Mindy's correspondence to him as he would have been during Christmas. She would be home soon. The letter gave him a yearning to be a part of a family like hers. He loved Mindy, but there was envy of her life, too. Stan dreamed about riding the ferry down the Pacific coast of Chile, with the misty winds, rugged wilderness hills, and the ice-carved fiords running down into the sea—a geographical and biological mirror image of the British Columbia and Alaska coasts.

† † †

Soon after the Sterne family's return from South America, Stan feared that his relationship with Mindy lacked progress, as if they were wandering in circles. They seemed to have fallen back into the formal ways that they had prior to their last evening overlooking the Columbia. This was not unpleasant, but it was not what he desired. On the other hand, he feared to pursue what he hoped for. If he took the risk of drawing closer to Mindy, he might lose what friendship he had with her. So, in the tension between contentment, fear, and hopefulness, he guarded against change, and Mindy seemed to be drifting away from him.

A growing crisis descended upon Stan, however, that might force him to act decisively. During the next months at the book discussion group, he closely observed the "distinguished" Bennett Uchida. Uchida obviously was on close personal terms with Dr. Sterne, and Stan noticed the two of them pull away after meetings and depart together, despite the lateness of the night. After the book discussion in April, Stan found Uchida attending to Mindy on the deck apart from others, and Uchida's special affection borne toward Mindy was apparent in how he watched her. Hoping to covertly learn the current status of Mindy and Uchida's relationship, Stan quietly asked a newcomer who the man was.

The newcomer said, "You don't know Dr. Bennett Uchida, a surgeon of rising fame in the Portland area? Don't he and Dr. Sterne's daughter make a nice couple?"

Jealousy flashed through Stan, and also crippling self-doubt. Who was he, Stan Timmons, a common schoolteacher, compared to this brilliant, affluent doctor? Conversations around him grew hollow. He had to be alone and decided to slink away. He spoke a goodnight to Mrs. Sterne and escaped down to the street, but his heart quailed when he heard his name called from the balcony in the voice he loved.

Stan waited, and Mindy ran down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Stan? Mom told me you were leaving. I haven't seen you for a week. What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. I—" Stan caught a motion and looked up behind Mindy. Uchida had appeared at the deck above the street and looked down silently. Mindy turned and saw him.

She took Stan's arm and led him up the street away from view. "Oh, I understand. Bennett . . . I'm not sure what to say. But I know what my father would say."

Uchida's first name had come easily to her lips and stabbed Stan's trembling confidence. He tried to speak without his voice failing. "What . . . What would he say?"

"You could talk with Dad, but it wouldn't be any easier."

"Go ahead."

"Stan, please do not be hurt. Bennett Uchida is a long-time family friend."

"Are you and he about to become engaged?" Stan had gloomily spoken over the end of her sentence.

"No," Mindy said, surprised, her voice cascading from a high note to a low one. "Is that what you're thinking? No, he has never mentioned the subject—marriage—not to me. He will, I think. But, I don't know . . . when."

She looked as if she might cry, and Stan had no earthly idea why. Mindy was sometimes matter-of-fact—objective about sensitive subjects—but she was, after all, a young woman with appropriate modesty and shyness, and Stan guessed that maybe she, too, was enduring some emotional confusion. He softened. "It's okay not to tell me what your father would say."

"Please understand, this isn't from me, and I'm not sure my dad would speak so roughly. But I know his approach to life. He would say . . . It's pretty obvious." She halted.

"What?"

"Be a man."

Stan was hurt. "What am I supposed to do? Challenge Uchida to a duel? Drag you to my cave?"

Mindy smiled and squeezed his arm. "Why don't you come back to the house? We can—"

"No. That's okay. I need to think about this. Good night." He turned away.

"What?" she said, rearing up angrily; then drooping, saddened, "Good night, Stan."

Mindy walked back to the steps and trotted up. Stan got into his car, and as he drove away, he looked up to where Mindy and Uchida stood close together talking on the balcony.

† † †

Stan struggled through the weekend, his joy extinguished, dampened beyond detection. He survived Monday morning at school, and by the afternoon, the challenges of the present superseded his depression, and the remainder of the week was little different. He went on a walk and followed a route he had not taken in a month. After having forgotten a dozen times, he brought a half-pound of hamburger for his friend the Boxer dog. When he came to the yard, he stopped and stared numbly. The doghouse was gone. He scanned the yard and the dog was not to be seen. The grass was barren and lifeless. A wooden bench lay on its side near the bare patch where the doghouse had been. He wondered now if the dog had been sent to the animal shelter and killed. He dropped the meat inside the chain-link fence and left, and even though the walk relaxed him physically, he felt all the more gloomy.

He caught a cold and did not see Mindy on the next weekend, but early the in following week she called him to make sure he would attend her birthday dinner on Friday.

Being the year of her college graduation, in lieu of a traditional party, the family had planned a birthday *event* and invited her friends. The centerpiece was an all-Saturday canoe trip down the Columbia River starting from Beacon Rock. Stan had tried everything possible, but could not arrange to be excused from a school festival scheduled for the same day—an event which would be devoted to decorating for the Spring Ball taking place that evening. Stan's duty, early to late all day, was to monitor and help the students.

Stan climbed into his habitual atmosphere of well-being and sober resolution. He decided not to buy Mindy a present, but instead to give her something his mother's mother had made and given him: a creamy-white, wool afghan kept stored in a cedar chest. Midweek, he stopped by his parents' place and found the afghan, still soft and sweet-smelling. It was a lavish, rich gift.

Mindy's birthday finally arrived. The actual anniversary was Friday, and celebrants at the dinner were only to be family members and special guests. To Stan's mortification, there were only four guests: he—himself, Bennett Uchida, and his two daughters wearing frilly dresses. Mindy wore a new dress, brown and gold, that her father had bought, and, Stan was

pleased to see, she also wore the ceramic cross Stan had given her. Of course, Sarah was there, quiet, and in the background of her beautiful child. Sarah, a neutral frame for the animated picture everyone watched when nothing else was happening.

Having had time to contemplate a looming disaster and not totally caught off guard by Uchida's presence, Stan managed to conceal his dismay by being polite and faux-cheerful. Mindy introduced him to Uchida as "Sarah's brother" and Uchida bowed slightly and said, "We've met." The seating appeared to have been arranged so that neither he nor Uchida sat adjacent to Mindy. From between Stan and Mindy presided her paternal grandmother, who, in an elegant German accent, directed the subjects of discussion. Stan suffered, and his torment grew worse when he overhead from a twin that "Bennett" and Mindy were to share a canoe tomorrow.

Stan revived momentarily when Mindy opened his present to her. She petted the afghan's softness and hugged it to her cheek, but torment returned with a vengeance when Mindy set the afghan aside and opened Uchida's birthday gift to her—a multi-carat, single emerald attached to a gold chain. Mindy was embarrassed when Uchida rose, smooth and calm, behind her, and with his surgeon's fingers removed the ceramic cross on its chain from around her neck, lowered the jewel before her with his hands at the sides of her face, and closed the clasp to suspend the jewel in place of the cross. The emerald complemented Mindy's flowing dress and reddening cheeks.

Dismayed and humiliated, Stan pictured himself lurching from the chair that consequently fell onto its back, but a second later he was still in the seat. He stole a furtive glance around the room. No one else seemed concerned and nearly everyone vocally admired the necklace, the children especially, one of which cried, "It's a natural stone, too!" Only Dr. Sterne was frowning, though Stan did not notice this. Grandma Sterne neatly folded the afghan.

Home at night, Stan burned with anger and heart pains. He had been shamed and was no longer afraid. Rather, he was now desperate and planned as soon as possible to ask Mindy to marry him. Even if he was too late, and Uchida and Mindy became

engaged on the canoe trip, he would preserve his honor by asking her and having it over.

Mindy called him on Sunday evening to apologize for Uchida's insult, which she said was unintentional. "He feels bad. But thank you for the afghan," she said.

Stan told her who had made it.

"Ah . . . I . . . I didn't know. I can't accept this gift," she said softly. "It's too personal. You should save it for the woman you'll marry."

"What if I never marry?"

"Oh," she said, perplexed. "How about if I keep it for now?"

"Okay. Uh . . . I need to apologize to you."

"For what?"

"For running off the other night, at the book discussion group. I was a coward . . . was . . . not thinking of you. I'm sorry."

Mindy was quiet for several seconds and then she said softly, "Thank you for saying that. I really do . . . like you, Stan."

She then related a detailed account of the canoeing day and barely mentioned Uchida, and from her story, Stan determined that nothing momentous had occurred. Nevertheless, Stan decided he should delay no longer. He took a little hope from her not adding the dismissive qualifier "as a friend" when she said she liked him—but when he proposed, she probably would politely refuse with the fatal "No," and that would be the end.

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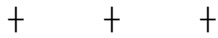
For the next few weeks, Stan was in agony, waiting for the perfect opportunity. Prior to this time when there seemed to have been no change in his relationship with Mindy, she had neither encouraged nor discouraged him. She remained warm and friendly as always, but had still seemed to be slipping away. Now—and Stan could not give a reason why—Mindy was different toward him. She stood and sat closer to him when they talked, she looked at him a little longer, she wanted to see him more often, and she was reluctant to say goodbye. Stan was exultant that at last she and he were drawing closer, and it felt quite natural—any awkwardness that had been between them had dwindled away. However, when they were together, his resolve to ask her to marry him collapsed, because to make a

proposal would always have been a rude interruption to whatever was happening. There would never be a smooth transition to the question. He rehearsed the lines of his proposal over and over, though he never heard his cue.

Days passed and faded from memory.



In the Pacific Northwest, summer weather often does not begin until late June or early July, but the first weekend of June this year grew hot, which fitted well with the arrangements of a Portland church catering to University students, a church that always held a school-year-end picnic on the Oregon Coast. This year's picnic would be exceptional, because there was to be the baptism of sundry students in the frigid ocean waters. Mindy had been associated with this group and she invited Stan to come. Stan accepted instantly because this, at last, would be an auspicious enough location and occasion to make his momentous offer. It helped when Dr. Sterne reminded him offhand that June 6 was the anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Normandy, which gave him the thought that if those men risked their lives for the sake of civilization, he, Stan Timmons, could risk offering his life to a girl, at the beach.

The early Saturday morning sky in Portland hung right overhead glum and foggy. Mindy drove the family van, full of students; Stan, from the front passenger side, controlled the volume, balance and selection of the music. He played Celtic, but also Swedish fiddle and traditional Japanese music. As the van climbed over the coastal range and neared the coast, the clouds and fog thinned. The drive from Portland to Ecola State Park, taken at a relaxed pace, consumed an hour and a half—not counting the curvy road to the park from Cannon Beach.

The whole trip there, Stan and Mindy talked with one another like old friends or colleagues. Their conversation was not just conversation—as they talked, their ideas, anecdotes, and observations swirled around them, each person complementing and inspiring the other. They excitedly finished each other's thoughts and invented new metaphors. They posed preposterous puns. They communicated with brief allusions in fragments of sentences and then would burst out laughing. Together they

conceived perspectives that they would never have evoked alone. Smiling faintly, Stan followed her every word and nuance, attentive as a poet at a premier performance of his work. His concentration and focus was total, and he watched Mindy with an abstract adoration, only seeking ways to beautify and complete what she said. As she drove, Mindy glanced over to Stan from time to time, and her countenance was a reflection of his. Unlike their stiff first conversation on the way to Steilacoom, this, though they could never recall exactly what they said, was a creative collaboration, a rhetorical duet.

When everyone emerged from the van and stretched away their stiffness, they took delight in the dazzlingly clear air that was fragrant with a scent of the Sitka spruce on the hills around them, and of the sea. Other vans and cars arrived and the students occupied the tables and their blankets with coolers and lunch baskets. Some ate quickly and walked the paved trail to the cliffs to watch waves swelling around the rocks below. One rock standing out from the land formed an arch. Other students ate slowly and fed the attendant ranks of seagulls, who squawked and fought, and rose into the air to pounce upon pieces of bread dropped near them.

The baptism hour arrived and the students walked down the beach trail. Frowning, the minister stared over the moving water; though he wore a wetsuit under his outer garments, he was not certain this was a good idea. The water would be numbing cold, despite the warm sunshine.

Stan sat on the dry sand, well back from the group. His thoughts collected upon Mindy and the words he might be saying before the day's end. The natural world all around fixed him into a condition of awe. He had been to the coast many times, but he had never seen the air so clear and the ocean so bright—nearby, the rushing translucent jade arches were iced with foam; and away to infinity, the water was a rolling, gleaming reflection of an intense blue sky undiluted all the way to the horizon.

Compared to the natural events, the human activity before him seemed insignificant. Stan could not hear over the waves, but he watched the cluster of people that stood above the highest reach of water. And now thigh deep, the minister and an assistant waited for a wave to surge around them, and they quickly

lowered each baptizee into the water, face up. The final person, a vibrant young man who was jumping in place, rose from the froth, spasmodically threw out his arms while shouting "Hallelujah!" and accidentally hit the minister in the nose. Those in the water waddled to shore, their long pants and skirts dragging; with towels draped over their heads or shoulders they shivered, and dripped dark spots on the lighter toned sand. Stan stood and joined the crowd. The beaming minister held his nose. Mindy hugged the vibrant young man, stepped back, and Stan lightly took her arm.

"I would like to talk with you privately," he said.

"I know." She smiled.

"What's the agenda for the afternoon?"

"Wait a few minutes and I'll tell you. When do you need to return home?" A larger and louder wave had rushed in just as Mindy spoke.

Stan leaned forward and concentrated his attention on Mindy's face. "Sorry, I missed what you said."

Mindy met his eyes, and under the intensity of his devotion, what she had been saying no longer seemed important to her. "I said, ah . . . I have to ask what the others want to do. How long can you stay today, at the coast?"

"I . . . Well, I have all day."

Mindy began walking away from him toward the group. After a few steps, she stopped and turned back to Stan. "I gave the emerald necklace to Sarah. Bennett really loves her, you know, not me. They need each other and their children need the two of them together. But Bennett is just not aware of it yet. You should talk with your sister more, Stanley."

Stan felt no resentment against her light-hearted accusation, and what did she say about Uchida and Sarah? Mindy gave Sarah the emerald pendant? Stan gazed after Mindy as she joined the assemblage that had drawn up into a circle for the minister's benediction. He had not noticed before—she was wearing the blue cross he had given her. Without a doubt, he had a chance!

Following the prayer, Mindy called out, "Attention everyone! I'm staying to hike along the beach. Anybody who wishes to join me may ride back in our van, if we have room. See me by

the driftwood tree there," and she motioned to a gray log higher on the beach. A few students wanted to hike—eight, besides Mindy and Stan—the rest of her former passengers found rides home, and it was all arranged.

Stan began looking for the right moment to ask his question.

The hikers climbed the trail back to the parking area, deposited unwanted gear, and headed north into the woods. A trail meandered between huge conifer trees, some trees standing alive and others lying dead. At one place, the trail emerged at the brink of a cliff guarded by a fence. Mindy pointed down to the black beach far below that formed an inverted V jutting out into the water, the V being tipped with a boulder that was roughly the shape of an elephant, and she said, "That's where we're going; we'll scramble down."

They continued back into the trees until Mindy veered left. "We'll descend here."

The trees thinned, and Stan and the others waded through armpit-high manzanitas along a narrow deer trail. The trail followed the edge of a ridge to a narrow point. From here, the trail dropped steeply left and everyone had to use all fours. Next and last came the hardest part—a bank of crumbling rock at the head of a narrow, sea-carved canyon. Going ahead, Mindy worked around the bank's edge, found the safest place, and slid carefully on her feet, but she built up momentum and ran as the slope leveled. Stan and the others emulated Mindy, and together they wound through the narrow canyon that emerged onto the beach under the dazzling sky.

Each of them seemed to have been drawn to a different fantastic natural feature, because they broke up and wandered away solo, or in twos—left, down the beach to explore the tangled mounds of washed-up trees, or right, to clamber over the enormous basalt boulders, or straight ahead to find multicolored sea anemones, rose-tinted sea stars, and tiny elusive crabs in the jumbled rocks in the surf. The beach was not composed of sand, rather of smooth black stones of a diameter suitable for a biblical sling. At one place where the land curved in deeply, the waves rushed in and tumbled and pulled at the stones with a loud rattling sound like applause from an enthusiastic crowd. *The rocks of the beach all clap their hands*, Stan thought. He and

Mindy moved as a pair and shared their discoveries with each other. Only members from their party occupied the beach, cut off as it was by cliffs to the south that fell down to the water, and by the giant boulders to the north.

Every so often, a wave boomed against the elephant rock and launched a shower into the radiant, cobalt air. Stan left Mindy behind, and when the waves withdrew, he danced out to the rock across what, seconds before, had been submerged boulders. He made a final wide step onto the elephant rock and clambered across. There was nothing now between him and the ocean, and he sat on the rock as if it were an easy chair; he braced himself as a deep wave rolled in and smacked the rock with a whoosh and roar. The water smothered and drenched him with heartless chill. He could not breathe, and his mind reeled as if he were falling. The alarming sensations passed, and he scrambled down the landward side of the rock, out of the water's reach. Then a new wave slammed the rock, and he laughed when he realized the cause of his disorientation. The rock moved! The force of the waves rolled it back and forth. Emboldened by conquering this minor danger, and steeled by numbed skin and flesh, his heart beating high, Stan knew this was the moment. He looked up toward Mindy sitting on a driftwood log, and when she saw him looking at her, she waved.

He jumped from boulder to boulder again, and settled next to her, out of breath. There was no one else nearby, the other roamers stood away, occupied with exploration and meditation.

Mindy spoke, "Amazing! When that wave crashed into the rock, all I could see was your silhouette, and spray shooting into the air. Aren't you cold?"

"Not really. My clothes should dry in the breeze and sun."

They ceased talking. Their speechlessness stretched on like the awful, interminable seconds before a high diver springs over the water.

Stan did not know what more to say. This was the opportunity he was waiting for; if he did not ask now, there might never be another one. Like an evening primrose, the flower would either burst open to glory and fruitfulness, or the petals would stick, night would drop, and the flower fail. Their relationship would probably languish. He did not dare to ask, to declare himself

completely, but he also dared not to lose the possibility of a rich life with her—any other future was void. His mind was unclear about everything else, but now focused entirely on what he wished to ask. In this instant, nothing else mattered. The pressure built and he struggled closer to speaking, until finally he overcame his dragging will and blurted without thinking, without breathing, reckless and bold, "Mindy, will you be my wife?"

At the exact instant of him asking this, Mindy looked overhead, and sweeping her hand in front of him, she said, "What bird is that?"

Stan groaned at the incredibly bad timing of the cosmos, and he did not answer her irrelevant inquiry, but repeated his question in the full text he had composed.

"Mindy, with your parents' blessings and in God's timing, will you become my wife?"

She did not answer, but turning her head around and looking backwards, she continued to watch the bird wing away, until it vanished over the hills behind them. Stan waited in suspense at having leaped from the cliff into the air. He thought maybe she had not heard him, though that seemed impossible, and he wondered if he should ask again.

"I don't know," she breathed in a sigh, at last.

He asked quietly, close by her ear. "What do you mean? You don't know the species of that bird?" He searched her face.

In return Mindy now looked Stan full in the face. She saw strength there, kindness, and a measure of bravery and determination; a touch of sorrow and loneliness; and love for her; an agile mind, curious about the universe of ideas and the scattering of living beings and spinning worlds. She saw natural laziness and contentment, but those growing from deep well-being. She looked down at his hands, healthy and ready to work hard and to defend her; and then she took his hands in hers. He had been a good friend. She liked the beautiful, intelligent eyes that hid behind his glasses. He would be a good life companion for her and father to their children. There was nothing and no one in their way. A bond of affection had grown between them and he had recognized this union long before she had. She thought about when Eve first looked into the face of Adam and took *his* hands. Eve knew that Adam had been thinking of her

and needed her long before she came into consciousness. Mindy knew she had been a part of Stan for his whole life, as Eve had been to Adam, even before she was created.

Tears welled in her eyes. "No, I know what the bird was. My childhood flying away." She took a breath and said, her voice clear, "My answer is *yes*; I will be your wife and give you children, if it be the Lord's will."

Stan was breathless, elated, and sobered, too. "Ah . . . Okay. Great! Then, I . . . I was wondering, may—"

Mindy did not wait for Stan to finish. They had been sitting close, side-by-side, not touching except for their hands. He removed his glasses. She moved nearer. He leaned slightly forward and their lips converged upon a single place. Stan felt waves of the sea roll up and surround them, but the water was warm, soothing, and it pulled on him toward darker hungry depths. He resisted, and it was a pleasure to resist and hold their pleasure in tension, moderated by charity and sensibleness. Then suddenly he was seized by heat and greedy energy coming from Mindy; she pressed hard and put her hands on his shoulders, gripping him. He opened his eyes, drew away from her, and smiled. His face was bright.

She looked embarrassed. "What's wrong?" she said, her voice lower in pitch than usual.

"Nothing. I'm . . . I'm just surprised," he said.

Mindy leaned her forehead on his shoulder. "You thought I was a cool fish?"

"I didn't think anything. You've always been so self-controlled."

"Now you understand why. Our family knows we must reign in our passions—not let them—loose, until . . . everything is right. We should collect the others and return to Portland."

"No, no. Let's sit awhile longer. We have plenty of time." He put his arm around her waist and kissed her again, on the cheek, and she did not kiss back. "I love you," he said gently.

Because of a drought, I go to a pool supply store to buy water. The company owns tankers and will haul the water. This company has a covered pool that people in the community use. An attractive girl there tells me I have to pass a swimming test before I can buy water. But I say I did not bring a swimming suit. As I contemplate what to do, I watch two men taking the test in the water. I tell the girl that I will wear my boxer shorts. She gives me a towel and shows me a changing stall. I get my clothes off and slide into the pool. She has by now changed into a swimsuit and is in the water, too, and comes alongside me and asks to race. I push away from the side. She stays ahead of me, swimming on her back. When she nears the other side of the pool I grab her foot. She stops swimming and stands close by me. One of the men in the pool says, "You have a beautiful young woman there," and I say that she is not mine. The girl says she can be mine if I want and I take these words to be a marriage proposal. Realizing I am already engaged, I ask her if she will mind becoming a second wife. I say that I know she is part of a dream. She says she could be my wife in the dream world—in case my real wife dies, she would always be with me while I sleep. I told this dream to Mindy and she was jealous, but later she said if something ever happened to her, I would be free to re-marry.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons.

Mt. Shuksan in the North Cascades.

Chapter 15
Marriage

At work the next day, Stan told all his classes he was engaged to be married. The news was received with excitement by the girls and with good-natured skepticism by the boys. In a Senior Advanced Prep class, Stan handed out a picture of Mindy to be passed around, and a male student substituted his own collector's card of a semi-nude female model. Within a few moments, Stan noticed red faces, guffawing, and giggling, and he nonchalantly walked back in the row, snatched the card and demanded the return of the real photo. This harmless mischief was tolerated, it being near the end of the school year. Stan was a popular teacher among students and his colleagues, and he was congratulated by everyone during the day.

The evening was Baby Guthrie's first birthday celebration, and the party was at Sarah and Stan's parents' house. Mindy, Mrs. Sterne, and the younger children came, and members of the cross-country team who still kept in touch with Sarah, along with a few of her closer friends. Before the meal, they paused for a moment of silence in memory of Beth Telford. Guthrie, who had just started walking, charmed everyone with smiles and happy mess-making. While at the party, Stan made a date to take Sarah out to a restaurant after the upcoming busy weeks.

Mindy graduated from the University with its traditional ceremony on Father's Day, and a few days later, Stan's high school conducted its graduation. The next weekend, Stan joined the older Sterne boys for a climb clear to the summit of Mt. Adams in central Washington. It was hard work for Stan, but he recovered from the effort in a few days.

He and Mindy saw no reason to delay the wedding, and they set a date for a Saturday in August before Stan's teaching job began again. Before then, Stan was to work on the grounds for the Chinook Assembly. Not long after he returned from Mt. Adams, he moved into an Assembly cabin with two other

summer employees. Because his rented house in Vancouver was close to the church, Stan agreed with Fr. Schmidt to let the house be used as summer quarters for missionary friends of Mrs. Schmidt. Mindy lived in the Bluff House and continued radio work with the University. She and Stan saw each other every day, sometimes riding horseback in the evenings. They began pre-marital counseling with Mindy's pastor, who was to perform the wedding. Stan thought the sessions wasted time, except for advice about finances. The pastor asked them if they were versed in natural family planning, and Mindy nodded.

The days moved swiftly, brimming full with joy in the hearts of the engaged couple. Without expressing physical affection, conforming to Mindy's family's wishes and Stan's acquired custom, they grew intimate emotionally, acquiring the familiarity with one another that often comes during a satisfying married life. And yet in the background was healthy sexual anticipation, which, in turn, required guarding against—required diversion, sublimation, and distraction.

The summer was passing contentedly, with one exception. Stan once had hoped Tommy would be his best man for the wedding, but Stan did not know how to reach him. Again he drove out to the farm and discovered that the property had been sold. The new owners knew next to nothing about the seller, who had handled the transaction without an agent. Someone had cleaned up the messes in the yard: Tommy Duckwitz and everything about him had vanished.

In the midst of all the activity, Stan kept his commitment to spend more time with Sarah. There was much left unsaid in Stan's conversations with her, and Stan resolved to explore some of that hidden territory. He took several workdays off from the Assembly during the first week of August to help his parents around the house and yard. One of those days, he met Sarah for lunch at a Vancouver park that featured a new playground. Guthrie ate quickly at the picnic table and tottered to the nearby sandbox where other children were building tunnels and roads. The adults talked while they finished their sandwiches.

"Well, my bachelor brother is hitching up," Sarah said smiling big and shaking her head.

"I can hardly believe it, myself," Stan said. "When we were children, Mom and Dad made us feel like we were the most important people in the world. I thought I was the fastest, strongest, smartest kid there ever was. Didn't you feel that way? I remember, they always gave me everything I asked for, for Christmas. One year there was a microscope and a toy electric organ, and another Christmas, bicycles for us both. Later on, into the teenage years, I wanted things that couldn't be bought. And I also realized there was always someone better than me and I began to understand my own darkness, what everyone has. But I never lost the feeling that I was the center of the universe. This is the funny thing about marrying Mindy. I asked for a wife, and here she is! She's the present I begged for as an adult. I don't deserve someone like her, but it seems that all of creation cheers for me, for my best interest."

"My life is different, though," Sarah said, now melancholy. "I'm at a different place."

"How would you describe it?"

"Oh . . . I feel suspended, waiting. Like I'm recuperating from self-inflicted injuries. It was foolish when I let Talus Schenk take me home. My own foolishness. I knew what he was like, but I was flattered. Yeah, he forced me, and that was wrong, but I should never have been alone with him. I should never have spoken with him. I'm not sure if you were aware of this, but I was rotten in high school. I gave myself away, not often, but—"

She stopped.

Before many seconds had passed, Stan began. "Really, I wasn't paying attention in high school. I'm sorry, Sarah, that I excluded you from my world. I was self-centered. I would have messed up with the opposite sex, too, except I was afraid."

"We seldom saw each other, even at meals."

"I'm really sorry, Sarah."

"You always found ways to mollify dad and mom—you knew when to quit an argument and how to make them happy. I would always butt heads until . . . until there were hard words . . . It's not your fault I went my own way."

At the sandbox, Guthrie was bumped by another child and knocked from his feet. He cried and Sarah jumped up and ran to him. She lifted him, dusted off his overalls, and put a yellow plastic trowel in his hand. He sat down in the sand and began digging as if nothing had happened.

Sarah had tears in her eyes when she returned to the picnic table. "I missed so many shoulds, but I have no regrets. Guthrie's the center of my life. He's the best thing that ever happened to me. My life was speeding in the wrong direction, and when I conceived Guthrie, I hit a brick wall. Talus helped me see this when he tried to pressure me into abortion." Sarah shuddered. "It is so weird and tragic that he's dead. Dr. Sterne said—" She stopped abruptly.

"You never told me how you felt about this."

"I can't despise him anymore, but—" She paused a long time while Stan patiently waited. She took a breath and then continued. "I realized I could kill my child, or I could be a nurturing mother. When I was at the mental hospital . . . I seethed against both those choices, but I hated being there, too. The Sterne family helped me be a mother. They never preached or said anything, really. They offered hospitality, and when I saw how they lived, I asked them questions. I sit down with Doctor and Mrs. Sterne once a week now, and we talk about anything I want, and then we pray. They . . . they ask me to share my heart pains." Sarah's voice had begun to break.

"Do . . . do you talk with Mindy very much?"

Sarah smiled, and waited until her voice recovered. "She's like a sister."

"What do you talk about?"

"Well, she talks about school, her work, and her family. And I talk about you."

"You do?"

"About how nice you are, how strong, and smart, like when you were a boy . . . What a great big brother you always were, back then. I think I'm the one—more than anybody—who helped Mindy see what a fine man you are."

Stan laughed, somewhat chagrined. "I thought my good looks and charm impressed her. You're wearing Bennett's emerald now, aren't you? Secretly?"

Sarah nodded, blushed, and felt to see if the golden chain was showing at the neck of her blouse.

"I wonder if you don't have designs of your own," Stan said with mirth in his voice. "You knew that Bennett was courting Mindy, but you wanted him for yourself!"

It was Sarah's turn to laugh. "I enjoy him and I love his children. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Yeah, they are, and he's a fine fellow, I guess. I should give him glowing recommendations about you, like you did for me," Stan said, half sarcastically.

"I don't think it will be necessary."

"How so?"

"Just wait."

Stan wagged his finger. "You're not engaged, are you?"

"No. I'm waiting, too. It shouldn't be long."

"You're funny." Stan stood and kissed his sister on the top of the head. He walked over to the sandbox and hoisted Guthrie, who had raised his hands to be picked up.

"Whew!" Stan said, holding him out at arm's length. "We have a stink—key diaper."

+ + +

The night before the wedding, the Sterne family hosted a folk dance on the shining wooden floor of a Chinook Assembly gymnasium. Many guests were friends of the family from around the country. The Sternes hired an acoustic musical ensemble from the University and Stan's dad and mom joined in the simpler dances. The conclusion of the event was a waltz that Stan and Mindy began by themselves around the circumference of the room, and when their circuit was completed, other couples swept onto the floor.

Stan walked Mindy up to the Bluff House in the company of his and her friends all holding candles, Bennett Uchida and Sarah among them arm in arm, and Fr. Schmidt. Stan gave Mindy a quick kiss, and he, in turn, was escorted to his cabin. Sipping strong porter beer with those who remained, he talked until midnight and then finally everyone left. He undressed and slept, but excitement kept him from sleeping well. At last, he arose for a breakfast by himself of cold cereal and fruit. He

donned his suit and walked to the Assembly chapel for communion, kneeling beside Mindy and holding her hand. She was wearing a lovely, long, blue dress and a knitted sweater, with her hair done up on her head. There were only a dozen other people at the service. With communion complete, Mindy squeezed Stan's hand and departed quickly to put on her wedding gown and have her hair brushed and ornamented.

Stan hung about the Chinook Assembly's cafeteria, which had prepared breakfast for the out-of-town guests, but he himself did not eat again. He wished he hadn't eaten earlier either because of the butterflies knocking about in his stomach, his mind so riveted on the role of the bridegroom that he soon must play. The whole affair emanated a dizzying unreality. He knew that the real marriage had little to do with the festivities, and yet the public aspects were essential.

The wedding ceremony took place at 10:00 in the morning on a circular lawn on the south side of the Bluff House. The sky above was clear and dry with fog in the western valley. There were music and Bible readings, and a brief sermonic exposition on the bride and groom's wedding vows, giving principles on how to fulfill them. Then the actual exchanging of vows and rings, and the kiss. Mindy and Stan—now Mr. and Mrs. Timmons—threaded a path through the crowd to the Bluff House where they cut a cake, glanced into a room full of unopened gifts, and shared a plate of finger food. To everyone's satisfaction—but not surprise—Bennett Uchida with Sarah at his side holding the 14-month old Guthrie in her arms, announced their engagement, and there were approving exclamations and applause. Stan approached Bennett, shook his hand, and pronounced his blessing on the match.

And then Stan and Mindy hugged and kissed everyone else all around, and were driven to the airstrip south of the estate, where they left at 1:00 p.m. by turboprop, piloted by a flying acquaintance of Dr. Sterne.

The plane dropped them at Sea-Tac airport, where they caught a limousine to the ferry port. Once onboard, they walked the decks and stood at the railings, feeling the salt breeze on their faces as the boat wound through the San Juan Islands and across the eastern end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Victoria. After

passing customs, the fatigued newlyweds walked the few blocks—rolling their luggage—to the Empress Hotel for a private 8:00 p.m. dinner in their top-floor corner suite, which overlooked the water and the Parliament building. There was a bottle of fine red wine for them, and pastries for dessert.

After the leisurely dinner, Stan got into the shower first, and when he dried himself, he dressed in dark-blue silk pajamas, a gift from his parents. Leaving the bathroom, he found Mindy tuning the clock radio to classical music on the CBC.

"Let's open this present now," she said. One of Mindy's parents' friends had given the newly married couple a thin package, along with specific instructions to open it on their wedding night—the only present they had brought with them.

They sat on the side of the bed, and Mindy removed the orange and red paper. Inside was a black clothbound book.

"The Song of Songs Which Is Solomon's," Mindy read, looking at the spine.

The cover boards were decorated with embossed images of celestial objects and flowers; in the center of the front was the line-drawn figure of a woman, and on the back was a man. Mindy opened the book and found the text in the midst of flowing orange images on golden yellow paper. The images told the story of the text with the man and woman naked and unashamed.

Mindy smiled at Stan. "Published 1935. Look, the decorations are hand-illuminated in real gold." Mindy turned to a passage and began reading.

> "Like an apricot-tree among the trees of the
> wood so is my beloved among young men.
> To sit in its shadow was my delight, and its fruit
> was sweet to my taste. He took me into the
> wine-garden and gave me loving glances.
> He refreshed me with raisins, he revived me
> with apricots; for I was faint with love.
> His left arm was under my head, his right arm
> was round me."

Stan took the book in his hand and closed it. "It's beautiful." He set it on the bedstand and kissed Mindy lingeringly.

She broke away and jumped up. "I'll be back in a minute."

He scooted under the covers and picked up a backpacking magazine that had been stashed in his luggage by somebody anonymous. Probably Bernardo. Mindy lilted into the bathroom with a coy glance over her shoulder. Stan had been watching her and not looking at the magazine. Soon, the water flowed in a steady swish. She seemed to be in there a long while, and Stan wondered if she would ever come out. He extinguished the lights except for the small bedside lamp. He sipped at his wine: he felt relaxed, and tired. The magazine story about gear blurred. Fifteen minutes later Mindy emerged wrapped in a huge beige towel. Her long hair hung damp and loose. When she reached the bedside, Stan's eyes were closed and his mouth open. She turned out the light, dropped the towel, slipped under the covers and cuddled up to Stan. He was on his side facing her and did not move.

"You silly boy; you're asleep," she whispered.

"I'm not," he mumbled. "Pretending."

She turned her back to him and wriggled closer to fit his contour. Her mother had told her this was called "spooning."

Stan slowly became aware of delicious warmth as he awoke from his brief interlude from consciousness. He suddenly was no longer sleepy or tired, or shy, but strong. He reached out and felt Mindy's body under his hands. Tonight their dreams were permitted, even required. Together they began learning the age-old rituals of the way of a man with a woman.

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During their week in Victoria, they expected to walk everywhere or take buses and visit the shops, gardens, and museums. Monday was Stan's birthday and they paused to listen to a street trio playing fiddle, guitar, and accordion. A large crowd had gathered. Stan dropped a $20 bill into the open guitar case. They bought a bakery cake and candles and threw an evening party in their room, just the two of them. On Tuesday morning, it grew cold, and they decided to stay in all day. By afternoon, it began raining, and Stan sat at a table near a window and wrote in

the pages of a thick pad. He scribbled furiously in spurts, noisily flipping the pages, punctuated with motionless spells of staring at the overcast sky. Mindy sat near the door to the balcony and worked on a knitting project, which, she said with a smile, was a sweater for him.

After an hour without conversation, Mindy at last said, "Tell me about whatever it is you're writing."

Stan did not answer. Her request hung beside him like an annoying waiter whom he wished to ignore, a waiter who interrupts a lively discussion. Stan grunted in frustration, pushed back from the table and jumped up to force himself from the writing pad. He stepped past Mindy out onto the balcony and put his hands on the iron railing.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't write and talk. Writing takes total concentration."

Mindy was hurt. This was their first conflict as husband and wife, and as minor as it was, they were not accustomed to petty irritations between them. "It's okay, if you don't want to talk."

"No, I need a break."

"Tell me what you're working on, if you want to," she said.

"It's a screenplay—sort of a musical/thriller/romance. But let's go inside."

Mindy put her knitting down, and with one of them on each end, they scooted a couch to the main window of the room and covered themselves with a blanket. Stan began speaking.

"The main character is a classical violinist who has reached the pinnacle of his career, but he quits playing and withdraws from the music world. He's Jewish. His last solo performance is in a famous concert hall in New York City. The audience cheers ferociously, but he leaves the stage and escapes to a taxi, which takes him to the airport. He boards a plane to a small city in the Southern Appalachians—a place he and his family went in the summer when he was a child living in . . . Atlanta.

"Anyway, while he is in this small Appalachian town, which is rich in music, he wanders the streets and listens. One night he falls in love with a beautiful fiddler whom he hears busking on the streets—falls in love with her *and* her music. Because of conversations with the girl's brother, he is challenged to discover the meaning of music. He . . . His relationship with the fiddler

never passes the aesthetic stage; instead, it moves him to communicate with his ex-wife. The story is about his quest for the laws that have governed music throughout history and across all cultures—laws built into human nature and physics. Laws related to melody, harmony, rhythm, and sounds in nature. I want to have those laws be illustrated in the life of the main character—that will be the human drama. I'll have him travel the world. Persia, where he's arrested . . ."

Mindy was listening intently, her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on the arm of the couch. "Where did you get this idea? It's really amazing."

"I've just been thinking. For research, maybe I'll learn to play an instrument—the violin."

"It's autobiographical?"

"Well . . . All fiction is. Even if authors use someone else's experience, the tale is part of them, as a story they heard or read. A fantasy story is the writer's fantasy."

"How does the story end?"

"I . . . I'll let you read my sketch. Sufficient to say, the violinist's life begins to conform to the laws of music, and he plays his violin again, but in a way that nobody thought of before."

"Ever?"

"I don't know much yet about violinists of that caliber, but I've never heard of one doing this."

"You won't tell me the secret?"

Stan glanced around the room, faking suspicion. "You never know who's listening."

Mindy scoffed, "Don't be silly. Alright, I'll read your sketch in a locked, underground bunker. Does your violinist get back together with his wife?"

Stan laughed, "Why?"

"Because people should never give up hope."

"Yeah, I agree, but . . ."

Her heart suddenly becoming tender, Mindy bounced over next to Stan on the couch and put an arm around his neck. "It's a lovely story idea, my husband. Do you really think you can write this screenplay?"

Stan patted her on the hand and stood up, suddenly sad. “Probably not; I’m not a musician and have no musical vocabulary. Maybe when I retire.”

He put on a coat, stepped out on the balcony, and watched the traffic passing below. A couple people of about his and Mindy’s age walked two dogs on leashes, but most people passed by alone. Stan wondered what stories their lives would tell.

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The couple had made reservations for staying at the Empress Hotel for a full week, but by Thursday, their energies charged to excess from idleness and good eating, they decided to leave Friday morning, a day earlier than planned. The change eliminated renting a car for a drive north on Vancouver Island and added another day to stage two of their honeymoon—hiking in the North Cascades in Washington State. The ferry company adjusted their reservation without difficulty, and on Friday they caught a shuttle to Sidney and crossed to Anacortes, where they found Stan’s car waiting in a fenced storage facility and packed with camping gear, as they expected. Anselm and Bernard had delivered it earlier in the week to make Mindy’s honeymoon smooth and complete. Stan had requested that the brothers not spray “Just Married” on his car and mar the finish, but as Stan started the car, there was a sharp explosion, and threads of black smoke eked from under the hood. Uttering an incoherent malediction upon fate, Stan jumped out of the car. When he popped the hood he was relieved to find a note saying, "SURPRISE!" and Stan figured the brothers had rigged a homemade smoking firecracker to the ignition system. The couple set off down the road and heard a terrible clatter. Stan shut down the engine again and got out to find a dozen cans tied to the bumper. They had been hidden under the vehicle.

He sighed and laughed. “The price to pay, I guess.”

In Bellingham they stocked up on fresh food and drove east up the road ending in the mountains.

“This is incredible,” Stan exclaimed as he walked around their reserved camping place. Tall trees soared from the ground, a glacier-blue stream in their backyard talked to itself in frozen

voices, and giant ferns splayed their fronds, begging for a glimpse of the sun.

Stan and Mindy unpacked equipment and set up their large tent. Then Stan collected wood for a fire while Mindy heated pork and beans on a stove. Sluggish mosquitoes were easy to kill, but they were persistent and hovered about their faces. Being a weekend in the beginning of the mountain hiking season, the campground was full, though there was so much woody space that Mindy and Stan felt they had plenty of privacy.

After they washed dishes they hopped into the car and drove up the switched-backed road to spectacular views of Mt. Shuksan and Mt. Baker. Snow lay piled high around the topmost parking area. A man in a heavy coat stood at attention before an easel, paintbrush in hand, studying Shuksan. Stan approached and looked at the painting from behind, but decided not to speak and the artist did not acknowledge the observer. Stan and Mindy left here to walk up a trail a short way, hand in hand. As night began falling, they returned to camp and snuggled into sleeping bags to warm up and read.

Every day they hiked a different trail—to a pristine lake containing huge chunks of ice, along a ridge to Mt. Baker's foot, up Shuksan Arm until they reached a glacier; one day they followed a creek through the designated wilderness area to the edge of the national park below Shuksan's northern slopes. If they were to go further in this direction, they would need more supplies, equipment, and a shelter. The park itself had few trails or signs, but was a remote world of living glaciers, monster trees, impenetrable undergrowth, flower-strewn meadows, and bare, steep rock.

They rested at about a mile past the national park entrance marker and Stan said, "I wish we were prepared to go deeper into the park."

"Maybe someday we can."

They ate lunch, soaked up the solitude, and tried to take in the jagged, white and gray, vastly larger-than-life features. On returning, before they reached the trailhead, night came down. They had wisely brought flashlights and though they walked along exhausted, the dark presented no dangers.

Summer days without rain in the North Cascades are an uncommon godsend, but after four days of this and hard exercise, Stan and Mindy welcomed the heavy patter of drops falling on their tent in the night and they decided to sleep late and stay in camp. Stan rose from bed before Mindy did and lit a fire from wood he had stored under plastic and he started water to boil on the stove. He cooked a breakfast of eggs, ham, and toasted bread with butter, and brought it to Mindy who remained bundled up in the tent. The air was chilly and they put on their extra clothing. On a run to the entrance of the campground—a short walk, really—to fill a bucket with potable water at the hand-pumped well, Stan struck up a conversation with the campground supervisor. She was an older, single woman who collected fees, kept toilet paper in the outhouses, picked up trash in the campsites, and lived in her Suburban. They talked books until Stan grew weary. He noticed several interesting people down the other fork of the campground road and excused himself to investigate. It was a group of climbers from an outdoor leadership school on a resupply stop. One of them, a young man in his mid-20s, was washing his blonde hair with heated water. When Stan asked where the group was headed, the fellow said tersely that they had summited Baker and would climb Shuksan next. An older man, surely a guide, brought the other—whom he called "Coyote"—a few squares of chocolate, and Stan was forgotten.

Later, from his tent Stan heard cheerful shouting coming from the picnic area and he remarked, "It seems they feel superior to the rest of humanity."

The rain let up by afternoon, the sun peeked out, and Stan and Mindy packed backpacks for two nights on a mountainside—one of the lower peaks in the nearby wilderness area.

The following day opened with mist and light rain. They parked at the base of the trail leading to the green slopes of Goat Mountain, which they had seen from their other hikes. They labored slowly, hearts pumping, lungs filling and emptying, and legs growing warm with exertion. Sweat soaked their shirts under their packs. The rainy and murky weather accompanied them up the trail that traversed the heavily timbered, coniferous woods and wound higher until it broke into low-growing

hardwoods and patches of spruce. The rain fell more steadily and Stan and Mindy pulled out umbrellas. They came to a clump of spruces that formed a natural shelter, and they sat close together in their midst. The trees were dense enough to shed the rain except for an occasional drop. With the warmth of their bodies between them, they ate lunch and listened to the dripping silence. Once rested, they went on until the space around them expanded as the trees thinned, although the glaciated mountains were hidden in enveloping cloud and fog. Stan could hear their hugeness and ice cracking and falling. The sky grew dark, though it was only about 4:00 p.m.

They hunted for a camping place. The only protected places were under spruces, and among the patches of packed snow they found a cluster of trees where a canopy could be strung.

Mindy said, "Our whole family could have slept here when we were little children."

Stan ingeniously tied up their cord-and-tarp house and laid out the sleeping bags on a ground cloth underneath, while Mindy fired up the cookstove to rehydrate and heat a stew.

Warm and dry, they sat in their bags and ate as the cold wind filtered through as cool breezes on their faces. It began to snow in heavy, wet lumps, and after Stan slung a rope into a tree and hoisted their food in a backpack to keep it away from bears, they nestled down and Stan read aloud for two hours from a paperback copy of *The Hobbit* that he had carried. Snow slid from the tarp.

Then they talked for awhile in whispers. Comfortable, and secure in his relationship, Stan decided to ask a question that had been bouncing in his head.

"Mindy, did you ever have a boyfriend?"

"No. There've been men whom I admired, and boys my age or older. One summer in my early teens, I daydreamed about getting married, but really, my life was so full of people and baby brothers and sisters, I never gave romance much thought."

"You never had someone you had feelings for and shared those feelings with them?"

"No more than as a brother or friend. Not even for you, Stan, not until just before we were engaged. Once when I was little, I wanted a teddy bear. When Christmas came, I got up early while

it was dark, before my parents or anyone else. I explored under the tree and found a large wrapped present with no name. It was spongy, and I was sure it was a teddy bear. I was excited. But we had to wait until after breakfast to open gifts, and then the present was given to me. It was a wonderful brown teddy bear, and I was so happy. But I hadn't given my heart to that toy until it was mine."

Stan thought about this while they listened to the wind hissing through the conifer trees as through clenched teeth.

"I still have the teddy bear," she said. "What about you, Stan? Did you have any girlfriends?"

"A few, I guess. In elementary school, I was always in love with someone or other, from afar. There was one girl I spent a lot of time with when I was a senior in high school. We rode bikes and went to movies, and kissed, but that's as far as it ever went. She went away to college—to Bellingham, in fact—and I stayed near home for college. We drifted apart; there was never a hard break. We saw each other once or twice during summers and on holidays, and then I found out she was engaged. I wished her well and sent a wedding present."

"Are you in contact with her?"

"Not really. She and her husband moved to Pennsylvania."

"What about when you were in college?"

"Well, I was in love with you from when I first saw you on campus, though I never knew your name until Tommy introduced us. When you passed by, I didn't have the courage to speak to you."

"When? When did you first see me?"

"I was a junior and you were a new freshman. Almost four years ago."

"Really? What did you like about me? You knew nothing."

"You were very pretty and wholesome. I liked your shapely form and the way you carried yourself. You were confident and unselfconscious. I liked your hair and wanted to pull it."

Mindy laughed.

"You were mysterious," Stan continued, smiling in the darkness. "But, I have another question for you."

"What is it?"

Stan began to stammer, and squirm in his bag.

"If you're too embarrassed to ask your wife, maybe you better not ask."

"It's only embarrassing personally. How . . . How did you know I was the right person?"

Mindy thought awhile before answering. "There's not one reason only. I liked your eyes. And I figured two together could fulfill God's will better than one alone, and . . . you needed me, and I needed you."

"How do you need me? You're always so self-assured."

"But I'm not. You're cautious and thoughtful, and I . . . well, I can be impulsive and reckless."

Stan laughed. "I don't believe it. You're anything but impulsive. You're being funny."

"Oh, but you don't know me very well yet. All my life I've been governed against my natural traits. I'm more like my younger brother Bernard than anyone else in my family. And he's adopted. Dad always says he errs on the side of *incaution*."

Stan laughed again and wriggled up behind her to be cozier.

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They fell asleep about 8:30 p.m. and in the night Stan awoke and did not know the time because he could not find his watch. He thought he had put it in his boot. He did not wake Mindy, but he lay there for endless hours and the sky did not brighten, nor did the snow stop. What if the canopy collapsed under the snow? What if a bear came up in the dark? The darkness was unfriendly and cruel. He felt damp, and hungry from energy expenditure, so he ate the plain bagel he had saved out from their food store in the tree. He repeated mentally over and over the words from a Psalm: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for Thou alone, oh Lord, makest me to dwell in safety," and in the midst of this prayer he fell asleep and did not wake again until light when he heard Mindy's voice calling from somewhere up the slopes. "The mountain is covered in new snow 200 feet above us! It's beautiful. Come and see!"

Stan "unched" from his sleeping bag, quickly laced up his boots, crawled from under the canopy, and clambered through the thick tree boughs.

From above the line of green where they had camped clear to the summit, their mountain was white-iced. Stan walked higher to where Mindy stood on an elevated snow patch and turned to face the panorama. Mists and ragged clouds swirled around, sometimes hiding, sometimes exposing the beauty of Mt. Shuksan to the east. More impressive than this was Mt. Sefrit across the valley, so near and steep with thin waterfalls plunging from the glaciers, that Stan swooned with dizziness. He steadied himself by holding onto a tree branch.

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They spent the day climbing one of the two summits of Goat Mountain. All of the new fallen snow melted.

It was not particularly dangerous for them—young, surefooted, and competent in the wild—but it was not safe, either, especially since they did not bring protective equipment or tools, other than a walking stick. Mindy carried a folded umbrella in hand, in case it was needed to self-arrest on a snow slope if she slipped. They walked through patches of newly exposed glacier-flower fields, awakened from their nearly yearlong sleep under blankets of snow—places where no human foot had trod before. Stan was mindful of how delicate these plants were—glacier lilies and other flowers that he could not name—and he considered it an extravagant privilege to walk in such a place. He and Mindy did their best to stay on rocks and walk softly. These flowers were throwing their spring flings, though it was mid-August. Once, Stan slipped on a slimy place and fell flat on this back, half-soaking his clothes, and he had to change into his extra shirt. Kaleidoscoping white and silver clouds teased them with far views of the mountains and tall pinnacles.

The only people they saw all day were a pair of wilderness rangers, and they talked with them, the female one a college student and the other a fellow who taught in Japan in "the off season." They were making sure "no one" was building fires and reminding "anyone" to hang food at night so as to not tempt the bears.

Stan and Mindy reveled in the natural beauty, and it was enough to walk, be there, and do nothing else—nothing but survive. They spoke seldom; in this uncluttered environment,

they could communicate without words. The mountain near the summits was steep and treacherous, and not only along the snow slopes and precipices, but also where thick, low-growing plants hung in the soil amidst villages of whistling marmots. A headlong tumble could have killed, but Mindy and Stan climbed carefully, hanging onto plant clumps. They worked up to a narrow, conifer-covered ridge that had snow patches falling away on the other side. From here they wormed through the trees up to the base of the steep, rocky true-summit. Mindy wanted to press forward, but Stan was concerned, because he could see no safe route to the top. He settled the matter by saying it was time to return to their tarp camp in the spruces.

In the evening they cooked a feast, stayed awake late looking at the stars in the cleared frozen sky, and watched a few meteors lingering from the Perseid shower. Once Stan had fallen asleep, he slept straight through until morning.

After their tiring walk back down, and after packing at base camp, they were ready for civilization again. They left the wilderness, drove into Bellingham, and took a room on an upper floor of a motel at the edge of a spreading commercial development. The windows of the room looked east toward an unmowed hayfield and trees. They planned to rest the night before their drive south to Vancouver, Washington.

Stan had parked the car in the lot behind the motel. After he checked the room, he came out to unpack what they would need. Mindy stayed behind to rest. Outside, Stan noticed a footpath leading from the parking lot through the mulched shrubbery into the unkempt hayfield. On a whim, he walked to the edge of the field. As he turned back, he heard a shout from a thick section of the trees and brush at the near edge. Someone was camping there—maybe a homeless person. Stan felt a sudden fear and walked away. He grabbed the suitcases sitting by the car and hurried inside. Once the door closed behind him, he stopped to look back. A grizzled man passed the door, but he did not look inside or stop. Stan waited thirty seconds and returned outside to see what he might learn. The man was pacing up and down in the next-door parking lot to the west. He shook his head in exasperation and began walking back toward his camp and Stan ducked inside before he could be noticed.

Stan did not mention the incident to Mindy, but suggested she not go outside alone. He soon forgot about the strangeness, and they rejoiced in a hot shower, a relaxing bed, and a travel program on television. This being the last night of their honeymoon, they talked about their experiences so far as man and wife.

Mindy sighed. "It's sad this is almost over."

"Yeah."

"The days passed so quickly. Our whole lives will be momentary. When you're in the middle of them, you think the days will last forever, and then they're already over."

"You know, Mindy, the part I'll remember was yesterday—on the green and snow-clad mountain. I'll always think of it being there, waiting. Clouds sail by, water slides down the cliffs, trees grow and the breeze blows through them, the rocks weather, flowers lie dormant under the snow. And no people except visitors. Just plants and space and sky and earth. It gives me an awareness of eternity. Whatever happens, I'll always be able to rest my mind there."

"Yes."

A silent moment fell between them.

Stan halfway rolled toward the side of the bed and picked up a book. There was a sound like a gunshot outside their window, or it could have been a truck backfiring. They heard a low reverberating sound as of feet pounding down the hallway of the floor above them.

"The noise outside. What was it?" Mindy asked.

"Probably nothing."

Mindy continued musing. "I wonder if we shall ever return to those mountains. We don't really have a plan or direction, except to begin a family. I feel afraid, suddenly. Our security seems so frail."

She paused to listen, but no more odd outside noises were forthcoming. "I have an idea, Stan. Let's make an arrangement. If we are ever separated by providence and circumstance, if there's a catastrophic disruption—I mean, if the country falls apart or there's war or something terribly bad, and we're separated and we don't know where the other is, let's have a

secret place to meet—not that we would need it, but just in case. What do you think?"

"It couldn't hurt. We could have it just for fun. How about the cluster of trees where we camped on the mountain? There's water, shelter and isolation, and fantastic views."

"Exactly where I was thinking."

"I'll be thinking about it for a while," Stan said. "I wish we could stay on the mountainside and not go back to Vancouver."

"We can come up here for a whole summer."

"I'd love that."

He began reading and Mindy fished out her book, and, as exhausted as they were, they fell asleep and did not notice when an approaching siren wailed and blue flashes strobed and fluttered on the field outside their window. Hours later, Stan woke with white light glaring at him and he fumbled for the lamp and switched it off.

They rose at daybreak and ate the breakfast of coffee cake, cereal, and fruit spread out downstairs for guests.

When Stan and Mindy passed through the lobby in leaving, the motel clerk, who was young enough to be a college student, said, "I apologize for the commotion last night. Did you hear?"

"Hear what?" Mindy asked.

"A man was murdered, shot with a gun."

Stan whistled. "Oh, my goodness."

"The police are supposed to come by to interview guests—those they didn't speak to last night."

"I hope they won't detain us," Stan said. "We have a long drive. Did you know that a man is living in the trees behind the hotel? The police should talk with him."

"Still? This morning?"

"Ah, yesterday. He ran onto the parking lot west of the motel, like he was waiting for someone."

"Oooo. That's where the shooting took place. There's blood. What did he look like? Greasy black hair, yellow and brown shirt, wide-set eyes, and tennis shoes?"

"Exactly. Does he only have one shirt?"

"We've chased him off fifteen times already this summer. We know who he is. I'm sure you can go ahead and leave, if you're quick. This might be helpful information and I'll pass it along.

If the authorities need more, they'll contact you. I have your phone number."

Something bothered Stan. "Are we in any danger here? Is the camper still on the loose?"

"On the loose? He was murdered. He was the victim, not the suspect. Too bad, but I can't say I'm sorry. He harassed guests this whole summer."

"Who was he?" Mindy asked.

"It's a sad story. He was a doctor once in Bellingham. He became a drunk, got sued a few times, and lost everything."

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The Sunday drive south to Vancouver was uneventful and smooth. Mindy and Stan stopped only for gas, and they ate cheese, broken crackers, and leftover trail mix. When the car rolled into the driveway and Mindy set her eyes on Stan's diminutive house, the new home of Mrs. Wilhelmina Timmons, she felt happy and sad. Stan felt a thrill in bringing a girl home who, for the first time, would not be leaving. His cozy, sparse, and celibate bachelor pad would never be the same.

There was a light on in the front room where they found the forgotten wedding gifts gathered into piles and still in their wrappings. The house was far cleaner than Stan left it for the Schmidts' friends. In the refrigerator, they discovered dishes of a fully prepared dinner, and on the counter, a "Welcome Home" note from Mindy's mother.

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Stan slept in Monday morning. Mindy had risen early to inventory what would be needed in the kitchen and she prepared breakfast, which they ate while wearing bathrobes and slippers. After washing dishes, they put on music and opened presents. Mindy made notes of who gave what.

They spent the remainder of the week organizing the house and shopping. On Friday Stan reported for a teacher in-service day. It was a gladness to come home afterwards and have Mindy meet him with an ardent kiss. These hours had been their first apart since they were married. They spent the weekend with family, and on Monday, Stan began teaching and Mindy hunted for a

part time job with a television or radio station. Midweek, when Stan arrived home from work, Mindy did not meet him at the door, but a message said she would be home in an hour. Stan took a strenuous walk and when he arrived at the door, she gave him an unusually strong hug.

"What's this about?" Stan asked, perplexed and amused.

Mindy hugged harder and whispered in his ear, "We're going to have a baby. I took a pregnancy test to be sure. I've known for a week, but pondered it in my heart until now."

Full of joy, Stan said, "Praise be to God," and suddenly felt weak in the knees at the thought of this new responsibility. He gently pulled away from Mindy and asked, "How would you like a backrub?"

"Yes. I'd love it," she said.

Two weeks after school started, Stan came home after work and found Mindy on the bed crying. It was the first anniversary of the death of Elisabeth Telford. Stan tried to comfort her and wondered what had become of Tommy.

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The days, weeks, and months followed one another swiftly in succession, and yet each one seemed to Stan a fantastical and lingering delight. He met with optimism the challenges of teaching. Mindy's income from producing features on artists, craftsmen, and musicians for a progressive radio station, and her thrift and handiwork around the house, and the presents and monetary gifts from the Sterne family made him feel wealthy. Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays came and went, a blur of happiness and color.

Stan felt further enriched when, on the Saturday after New Year's Day, Sarah and Bennett Uchida married in a simple ceremony at the Chinook chapel, attended by friends and family members. Bennett's comment was he wanted to "bring cheer to the bleakest month of the year," and the wedding did complete and extend the holiday season, especially for Stan's parents.

Mindy's pregnancy went well all through early spring and she worked for the radio station right up until the birth in mid-May. Stan proved to be as good a father to his firstborn child as he had been a godfather to Sarah's Guthrie. Their new baby became the

fulcrum of their lives and Stan felt a rush of exultation whenever he contemplated his son, whom he had named Maxwell Justus Timmons. Stan loved it when, as he held him, Maxy would quietly study Stan's face.

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Less than two weeks before the end of the school year, the weather grew unseasonably hot, and during the lunch period on a Friday, a rowdy male student drenched another student using a bucket he had found somewhere. The targeted student had long been the butt for teasing. Stan had observed the incident happening outside his window during lunch, and inspired, he ran to the janitor's closet. He took a plastic bucket and halfway filled it in the sink, looked frantically for something to cover the bucket with, found a towel, and draped it over the bucket. He approached the crowd of students who were still laughing at the dripping victim, who grinned pitifully.

As Stan neared the perpetrator, the other students shuffled their feet and grunted declamatory remarks. Stan said, "I saw what happened. You're cruel."

The bully put his arm around the victim. "Sammy here is my friend. He was sweltering hot. So, I gave him a shower."

"Is this right, Sam?"

Sam was too afraid to answer, but he shrugged off the arm.

"Well, I guess it's okay," Stan said. "It is hot, isn't it?"

"Yeah, real hot," the bully said, slinging imaginary sweat from his brow. "I could use a cold shower myself."

Stan whisked off the towel and heaved the whole contents of the bucket onto the perpetrator. The students near him jumped back and the soaked bully let fly with an obscene exclamation. Stan picked up the towel and returned to his room, feeling that justice had been served. But near the end of lunch hour, he heard a scuffle outside his door and he went to the hallway. The instant he turned the corner, he met the fierce eyes of the student he had drenched, who sprung from a crouching position as he flung a bucket of water squarely into Stan's chest. Stan was surprised, but relieved it was only water. The student, pale and serious, speed-walked out the door, along with two of his friends, who were laughing. Stan began to worry about what

might follow. Water was harmless, but perceptions often determined all.

After classes were over for the day and the students—except for a few loiterers—had departed, and as Stan prepared to leave, the principal, Mr. Cooper, called him into his office.

Cooper came right to the point.

"Mr. Timmons," he said, "I have just now spoken with the superintendent and we concur. What you did today is child abuse, and your employment is terminated—terminated—effective immediately. You should also know, sir, the water fight that you initiated escalated into violence this afternoon. One student was injured when he was hit by a chair, another student has been arrested, and we are likely to expel him. Three other students will be suspended for ten days, which means for the rest of this term. This is serious because they are seniors and might not graduate. You may wish to contact an attorney, because the student you assaulted—allegedly assaulted—may press charges. In any case, you are to pack your belongings immediately and . . . and leave school property."

Stan was stunned. "Terminated? You mean, I'm fired?"

"That's it."

"Don't I get a chance to defend myself?"

"Not at this time. Technically, in cases like this, you would be only suspended from teaching, until a hearing can be conducted. But, you know . . . I can't say more, Mr. Timmons. If you wish, you can file an appeal to the superintendent. You have the right, but I wouldn't bother."

"Why . . . Why not?" Stan's voice rose in pitch because he was near to tears.

"Frankly, Mr. Timmons . . ." Mr. Cooper leaned closer, and if Stan had thought it possible, Cooper appeared to be afraid. His voice became thick: "You're not wanted." Next, he looked down at the trash can and mouthed inaudibly. "I'm sorry."

Cooper straightened up and tried to clear his throat. "That's it, Mr. Timmons. Pack it up. And I advise you to stay away from school property."

"What about my students? I'm preparing final exams and I have writing assignments out, and the students are working hard to finish them."

Cooper appeared to not have given thought to this and was dismissive. "Oh, don't worry about that. Leave notes for a substitute. Have them on my desk Monday morning by 7:15 a.m.—don't come yourself. That's all. Goodbye."

Cooper stood up and held the door open.

Stan returned to his classroom and called Mindy, telling her he would be late coming home. He could not tell her he had lost his job, but she could hear trouble in his voice. He answered her inquiry simply: "Please wait until later."

They had plans for supper at her parents' house, and Stan said he would meet her there. Mindy was helping prepare the meal since Dr. Sterne was entertaining a significant guest—someone high up in the federal government. It took Stan an hour to pack the several boxes of personal papers, books, movie recordings, and the literary and natural curios with which he had decorated his classroom. He felt stupid that he had thrown water on the student. It had been harmless, but unwise in the extreme. One careless act and his life changed permanently. The world was full of such dangers.

He regretted leaving his students without being able to say goodbye. An idea came to him and he quickly typed on his school computer: "Goodbye. I love you all. Call me at home, if you want," and he gave his phone number. His idea was to place the letters in the senior students' journals, which he always collected on Friday and took home to grade over weekends. The printer started, but it was a miscalculation, because just then the school resource officer, wearing a gun, marched into the room, looked around, and unplugged the printer. Stan had already loaded his boxes into his car, and now he picked up the pile of notebooks, hoping to escape with them. The resource officer came up. "You'll have to leave those here." Stan handed them over. The officer put them on a table and grabbed the completed letters from the printer, folded them and tucked them into his pocket. He said, "Do you need help carrying your stuff?"

"No."

"You had better leave, Mr. Timmons. I'll lock the door for you. Have a nice weekend."

On the drive home, Stan nearly rear-ended a car stopped at a red light. When he reached the house, he unloaded his

belongings, showered, dressed in comfortable clothes—a hooded sweatshirt—and called Mrs. Sterne to say he was on the way. He drove to the Sternes', parked on the steep road beside the property, ran up the steps, knocked on the door, and entered. Everyone was seated, waiting for him, and he took his place beside Mindy, who sat at the corner of the table. Mindy had just breast fed the baby, who was sleeping in a cradle on the floor next to her. The dining room table was set with the best china and silver; each setting included two glasses sparkling in the candlelight, one glass for wine and the other for water. Mrs. Sterne introduced Stan to the visiting dignitary, and Stan did not catch this person's name, but she was a presidential cabinet secretary of an important office. Stan nodded stiffly and mumbled with the numbness of dejection pressing upon him, and he felt further discomposed at not having dressed better, though he knew that no one minded.

Dr. Sterne led the blessing, and dishes of hot food began their circuit around the table.

Mrs. Sterne cheerily asked Stan how his day was, but he could hold back no longer and blurted, his voice flat and cold, "Terrible. I was fired today."

This and the following page, the same building as on the cover. January 2017.

Universal Man/The Chinook Assembly

There is to be a meeting of an anti-abortion group in my house. I want to clean up, and so I take a bath, but members of the group begin arriving early. At that time there is a pro-abortion march in town. Also, there is to be a white separatist march on different but nearby streets. The anti-abortion people decide to stay away from controversy and cancel their event. The abortion supporters are all draped in white in mockery of the separatists' outfits. I decide to join the abortion march wearing only my white towel as a protest against them all. To get into the parade, I walk down the middle of the road.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

Now a yoga boutique.
"Yoga is the journey of the self through the self to the self."

Chapter 16
The Grand Tour

Tommy woke with a jerk and sat up in bed in the dark room.

"What day is it?" he asked.

"Sunday," he answered.

This Sunday was the day after Tommy waited for Ponder with a sniper rifle on the church tower, seventeen months prior to when Stan announced that he had been fired from his teaching job.

Tommy threw off the bedclothes, flung his legs onto the floor, and did not move further while he tried to unscramble his brain. "Thank God, it was only a nightmare."

He let his sweating body down against the mattress and folded his pillow under his head. He had dreamt he had killed Talus Schenk yesterday, that he had almost severed his head from the shoulders. How realistic the dream had been!

As his mind cleared, awareness and dread slowly grew that these images were not from a dream, but rather neuronic recordings of reality. He did kill Schenk yesterday morning. The screams were real. The knife was sharp like glass and the cut swift and clean, and Tommy had jumped back before the bright liquid had squirted toward him. The head hung at an unnatural angle. He did cut Schenk's wrists and type a crazy suicide note on Schenk's hand computer and put it back in the dead man's pocket, and he did drop the knife beside the body on the vacant lot that Schenk had cut across toward a coffee shop where Schenk's car was parked. He did watch with fascination the blood soaking into the ground. After the killing, Tommy had driven to the farm, and he did vacuum, spray, and scrub the mud from his pickup; and he did shower and change, and clean his shoes, and wash and dry his clothes during the rest of the afternoon; he did sip half a pint of Scotch whiskey and turn on a mindless movie; he had crawled into bed fully dressed five hours ago and fallen into a heavy stupor.

The skin on the fleshy back of his upper arms felt cold and numb. He rubbed his frozen arms with his hands, but they would not warm at all.

He pulled the covers up and lay in bed nearly an hour without moving, hoping for the horror to go away. It would not, and he argued against it by reminding himself how Schenk had deserved death for robbing him of life. His argument won, and he got up and showered again. Despite his labors of sanitation and the suicide ruse, he felt certain he would be caught. A few people knew of the animosity between Schenk and him, and the police would find those people.

"What should I do today?" he asked himself. "Should I run and hide?"

He did not care what happened. They could execute him now, for all he cared, and this would be better than life in prison—except, he remembered, he would not be able to take revenge on Ponder. *I should be free and live long enough for another try against Ponder.*

He lit a fire in the kitchen woodstove, pulled a leftover casserole from the refrigerator, and turned on the television in the den. He would wait for them to decipher that he had killed Schenk. Why should he make it easy for them? Portland news came on and Tommy turned up the volume. He was incredulous at what he heard. He had not expected that Schenk's suicide-apparent would make news; bottom feeders like him were killed or murdered themselves day and night in the metro area, but here the broadcast was live-from-the-scene near the vacant lot. A police detective came on and said no motive had been determined. He denied that they had a suspect, though Dr. Mark Ponder was wanted for questioning, and the detective asked the public for any relevant information it might have. Tommy pummeled his head with his fist. "Why should this be news?" he demanded of the television.

Then it came to him. "They suspect Ponder!"

The police, it appeared, had not accepted the suicide ploy, which did not surprise Tommy, but at the moment of the killing, it had not occurred to Tommy that Ponder's knife would have any effect on the investigation. Tommy had used the knife simply because he had taken it with him.

This morning, he was convinced the knife would do little more than delay the authorities, until they could talk to Ponder and investigate his alibi and begin looking for a person like Tommy, such a person who Ponder was sure to say had the knife.

Tommy kept watch on the news, and as the hours progressed and the "full story" came out the next day and continued to be stirred around all Tuesday, he relaxed his nervous vigil of watching the driveway because, to his amazement, Ponder had become the wanted man. Police believed that Ponder emptied his bank accounts, killed Schenk over something sordid, faked the suicide, and disappeared into Canada.

"But why did the police think Ponder would stupidly leave his knife at the murder site?" Tommy asked this question to the television, as did members of the press to the police, and the answers the police gave were not good.

"Because they have no one else to blame!" Tommy said gleefully. "That means I'm in the clear and free, except . . . except for Franklin."

Tommy's relief was a temporary mania—a childish reaction of having defeated his opponent, the law of society, and its enforcers, who would never understand that Talus Schenk deserved to die.

As a week and more passed, and Christmas dragged by without him observing it, except by watching the walls and daydreaming about Beth, he became saturated with feelings of power that offset his despair and guilt. He grew angry again that Ponder had escaped justice. He abandoned his regime of working out, though he went for walks in the woods and fields at dusk, which softened and hid the hard, crisp edges of the world and his tormented face. Once or twice a week, he drove into Portland and wandered the streets watching people. A few times, he stopped to see Franklin. Unlike in the past, when they had maintained jovial conversation, Franklin had become anxious, distant, and businesslike, except for his stutter, which had become worse.

"I tol . . . told you that we'd have to c-cut our relationship, after our last transaction," Franklin said upon Tommy's first visit after he had acquired the sniper rifle. Y-you sh-sh-shouldn't come by here anymo . . . more. Seriously."

He asked Tommy for more money for the rifle, even though Tommy had already paid in full. Tommy gave him whatever money he wanted without raising issues. Tommy never told Franklin about killing Schenk, and Tommy was certain he never guessed, otherwise Franklin would have spoken, because he knew about the knife.

Tommy occasionally dressed up and went to the fanciest Portland restaurants and imagined Beth sitting opposite him at the table wearing a sumptuous dress. These imaginings became convincingly real. Beth never spoke, but she looked pleased. Tommy still loved her and had killed Schenk for her. He also had the impression that she was usually somewhere in the house or on the farm, cooking a meal, going on walks in the fields with the old collie dog, shopping at the grocery.

Once, while he sat watching television, she came up from behind and began massaging his shoulders. He took her hand and kissed it. She pulled away and walked around a corner, and he heard her climbing the steps to the bedroom. Tommy followed, but when he opened the door to their room, she was gone. He was angry and frustrated, but not with Beth. It wasn't her fault that she could not stay.

At this point, he began having dreams of a baby crying.

One weekend, he drove into Portland to his old apartment building, ran up the steps to Franklin's, and tapped the door percussively with his fingernails, but no one answered after several repetitions. Tommy knocked louder with a knuckle, and a strange woman opened the door and invited him into the room, but he declined. She was barefooted, heavily made up around the eyes, dressed in tight black pants and a pink sweater, and looked to be in her mid-30s.

"Where's Franklin?" Tommy asked.

Fear swept over her face and she looked up and down the hallway. "The previous occupant is dead." she said, scarcely above a whisper. "They shot him like a dog. If you're a friend of his, you better never come back."

Tommy thanked her for the warning and rocketed down the steps. He searched the obituaries and found a sketchy confirmation of Franklin's death. Tommy could not believe what the paper said, that Franklin had earned an LPN degree and

had been a nurse for some years in a retirement community. He had been survived by a sister in Delaware and no one else.

Tommy was now alone and unknown.

He stopped working on the farm, but developed a routine that included watching certain television programs, which beguiled him away from the meaningless hours. He searched his grandfather's library for books to read, and in the process found in and behind the books envelopes containing bundles of one hundred dollar bills. After he had come across two such packets, he methodically rifled through each book and turned up thousands of dollars.

One book caught his attention and he read it straight through, morning and night, stopping only to prepare food. The book was *Crime and Punishment*, by Dostoevsky. The main character, a poor student named Raskalnikov, was liberated by a philosophy that he was above common morality, and he killed two innocent old women while robbing them. Tommy's motivation had been primitive revenge, nothing higher or lower. While reading, he fell into a heavy despondency of guilt, and he came to envy Raskalnikov for his philosophy and for having Sonia, the saintly prostitute, who rented her body only to feed her brothers and sisters. She became Raskalnikov's confessor, left prostitution, and followed him to Siberia where, waiting for him to be released, she worked as a seamstress near the prison. When Tommy reached the end of the book, he threw it against the wall, and later he put it into the fire. Tommy had no one, and he had no intention of confessing or repenting, and no probability of becoming a new man.

Nights shrank, and spring stirred in the ground early. A gauze of natural cheerfulness covered the gaping wounds in Tommy's being and he took comfort in his fantasies, which continuously searched for new territory. For hours after sunrise, while he lay in bed with his eyes shut, he replayed the life he had imagined for himself and Beth until he became sick of it. In his mind, he went back and re-created his early family life and added brothers and sisters, and he made his parents loving and interested in their children. This imaginary history eventually became unbearably boring and he began to wonder about his real family. Why was he an only child? Tommy felt cheated. Had his parents—like so

many people—had they aborted his siblings? He searched his memory for clues.

There was a memory that never made sense, and as he probed, the particulars took shape into a cohesive, albeit hazy story. He was about five years old and his parents took him to a doctor's office; but Tommy and his daddy did not go inside. They sat in the minivan and listened to the radio, while Mommy went in by herself. Daddy got out of the van and fiddled with the back hatch. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, and at lunch they drove to a restaurant. Tommy got a happy meal and plastic toy, but he threw the toy from the window when they returned to the doctor's office. Daddy said nothing to him about littering. After a long time, Mommy left the doctor's office and walked as if she felt bad.

Tommy mentally stood back to examine the assembled memories and determined that his parents had aborted a baby sister or brother. The rage that had cooled since the end of the year heaved through him. Perhaps Ponder had evaded justice, but the killer of his baby sister might be accessible. The thought of his parents being parties to his sibling's death never occurred to him, no more than it was in him to blame Beth for aborting their baby. His parents lived miserable lives and abortion was its own punishment; but for the paid killer, it was another matter.

Tommy remembered and calculated. He and his family lived in Salt Lake City when this happened. His mother's family was raised in Salt Lake, where she and his dad met when she was in college. They moved to the Northwest when Tommy was seven.

† † †

In early March, Tommy put the farm on the market. Between showings that he himself conducted, he began disposing of his grandparents' personal property. The farm sold in a month and a half. (He did not use his grandparents' attorney for the closing.) After the farm transaction was completed, and before the time he had agreed to move, he sold in one lot everything left on the farm, except for machinery, implements, and tractors, which he had sold separately—what the buyers of the farm did not want. He rigged a bed in the back of his truck under the canopy, loaded up camping gear, the rifle plus ammunition, and his considerable

cash, and left the Portland area on May 1, while Mindy Sterne anticipated her 21st birthday party, where she received the emerald from Bennett Uchida, and while the jealous Stan Timmons fretted about missing the canoe float down the Columbia.

Tommy drove to Salt Lake City and checked into a cabin connected to a family-owned motel two hours north of the city. At the cabin he looked up abortion clinics in the yellow pages and began driving around to inspect them. When he found the right one, his memories strengthened and confirmed the location.

+ + +

Within two weeks, from nearly 400 yards away—from the porch of a vacant house on the nearby hillside—Tommy shot in the head a gray-haired man wearing blue scrubs as the man entered the abortion clinic back door. With a second shot he killed the security guard, who had dived to the ground in plain view from Tommy's vantage point. Tommy calmly disassembled the rifle and packed it into a black bag that he slung over his shoulder. As a clean-cut, straight-backed, ambitious man, he walked block after block until he came to a crowded bus stop and rode the line for about half an hour. He jumped off the bus at a stop where there were no people and walked until he found a private place in a neighborhood near the railroad tracks—a place in thick trees where winos often drank and smoked—where he quickly changed his appearance. In minutes, he transformed into an unclean homeless person whose back was misaligned, whose jaw hung slack, and who understood only one-third of what transpired around him.

With his gear stowed in a shopping cart under a dirty cover, he jolted on broken sidewalks deeper into the neighborhood, focusing on nothing; and on a curve in sight of no houses and when no cars came by, he jerked his bag from the cart, shoved the cart into shrubbery at the edge of a yard, removed his ragged coat, rolled it under his arm, and walked another block around a corner to where his pickup waited along the street, in-between homes shaded with trees. Timing it again to avoid being witnessed by traffic, he loaded his gear into the truck and drove away at a perfect speed. Not too slow. Not too fast. All this—

every step, every detail, and every stop—he had intricately planned ahead of time.

When he reached his cabin late in the afternoon, he made a drink with Scotch whiskey, ate a piece of packaged cake, and fell asleep on the bed.

A few hours later, Tommy woke and did not know where he was. As the room resumed shape, he recalled the points of the compass and his thoughts began turning, and before his defense against his conscience and the world began to chatter, he felt sick. He had accomplished this goal, and there was nothing to do but end the aloneness and self-torture. The shenanigans of concealing his identity and his trail had been futile. He could not outrun black despair, more devastating than law enforcement: far more punishing. He chided himself for playing the games that went all the way back to buying the rifle through Franklin. He understood perfectly how desperate killers would take revenge and then destroy themselves afterwards. There was no need for cunning machinations in a murder/suicide, since it was a dead-end journey. "You fool," he said to himself. He could shoot himself or take an overdose of sleeping pills, or both. He opened the Scotch. This would be a good beginning, but a sharp stab pierced his thoughts. But what if he had not killed the abortion doctor who had killed his baby sister? What if it had been a male nurse? How could he be sure?

Tommy reached for the television remote control and cycled through channels until he hit a news screen. He had caught the anchor mid-sentence, saying "anti-abortion terrorist."

With fascination, Tommy listened. This was not a Salt Lake City station, but a national network. The story confirmed it was an abortion doctor whom he had killed, but after his initial satisfaction, this is not what held Tommy's interest. The most spectacular aspect about the story was that it was almost entirely untrue. Tommy was not an anti-abortion terrorist, nor a "zealot," nor a "crusader." He watched as leaders of the anti-abortion movement castigated him, and pro-choice leaders demonized anti-abortion leaders and him in the same breath; and the president of the United States said what a tragedy this was. Dr. Spencer—husband, father, churchman, civic leader who had helped many people, had been butchered in the prime of life.

Police and the FBI swore they would never quit until they had brought the killer to justice. They would do this also for Michael Lehi, an off-duty police officer who made the supreme sacrifice while protecting the doctor.

Tommy screwed the cap back on the Scotch and flipped through the channels. Every news station covered his actions of the day, and every one was identical in theme. This untruthfulness in the media started his thinking in a direction he had never before conceived, which would never have occurred to him otherwise.

He knew abortion killed a baby. It killed some women. He had killed in revenge for the young woman who would have been his wife, and for his daughter, Portia, and for his baby sister who did not have a name. He killed without a political or religious agenda, and yet not a single soul on the news, either anti-abortion or pro-choice, had guessed or even considered the truth to be a possibility. The anti-abortion spokesmen, too, gave more sympathy to the slain killers than they did to the innocent babies that the abortionists dismembered by the hundreds. Only one of the pro-lifers mentioned the babies.

They're scared shitless, Tommy thought with contempt.

The news continued through the next day and the story linked to multiplying unrest across Salt Lake. The police—city, county, state, and federal—had locked down the city searching for suspects, had taken people into custody and were investigating local anti-abortionists. People were angry with long waits on the interstates and at plane terminals. From his cabin outside of the primary search area, Tommy watched the news with enthrallment and he interspersed monitoring this with the war movies playing in recognition of Armed Forces Day. He brought in food and began exercising again for the first time in months. Tommy watched, and it was impossible to believe that the story had anything to do with him.

Thoughts of suicide fled away, replaced with glimmers of purpose. By the second day after the shooting, he had sketched a rational outline. Tommy spoke aloud as he paced around the room and randomly picked up the trash on the floor, subduing the unruly clutter that had accumulated. His thoughts came in

logical sequence, and he stated them as a legal document, but without the whereases.

"The press cast me into a role of an assassin terrorist.
"I did not ask for this part.
"I have never been on a national stage.
"This is an opportunity I have sought my whole life.
"I will be ridding the earth of predatory serial murderers.
"No one else is willing to do this.
"Because I have killed, my conscience is prepared.
"I did not collapse like Raskalnikov; my fortitude is greater than his. Besides, he is not real.
"Everything I have loved is dead.
"I can alter my identity and personality. I speak with authentic accents.
"I am skilled in shooting.
"I have money.
"This will give me a unique, consequential purpose.
"I will become significant to history.
"Someday, I may find Mark Ponder."

Tommy paused before he composed another *whereas*. His eyes roamed the room and saw nothing before him. He was remembering, remembering. At last, he concluded that he was correct and could add the following to the conditions for a resolution:

"I have left no trails. No one can connect me to the anti-abortion movement. No one will guess who I am.
"Therefore . . . I will live and become an assassin."

† † †

Tommy as Thomas Sherman/Duckwitz finally, completely dissolved and ceased to exist. Behind him remained an impenetrable inky cloud. He banged up his truck, ran it without oil to ruin the engine and sold it for junk, and then he bought and licensed another truck with a false identity. He traveled from city to city, randomizing his selection by shutting his eyes and throwing a dart at a United States map. He lived in motels, staying no longer than three or four days, paying cash and giving false names. The names also he scrambled by picking up a

telephone book, jamming his finger down, taking the name indicated, and then modifying it slightly. He changed his appearance and his methods frequently. He found abortion places that were easy to survey, and when he killed, the targets he chose were not always doctors; they also were nurses, security guards, escorts, delivery drivers—anyone who served abortion. For him, they all assumed the face of Ponder. When he killed, it was at the clinic if the environment allowed a clean escape, but he also killed anyplace he found or followed his chosen subject. He was a hunter of opportunities and he was patient. He escaped through narrow crevices. He cracked hardened security measures. He could be slow and methodical, running each move through an intricate battery of mental tests. He adapted, innovated, and acted on impulse when the game ran across his path.

Once, he was driving in the vicinity of a certain clinic in a large East Coast city. He approached an intersection and spotted the vehicle of an abortion worker. It was the hour and the usual path of its departure. The car was waiting for the light to change. Tommy scanned all around; no people or cars were in view, and he rolled down his window. He made a free right hand turn and recognized the woman who was wearing the pink flower-patterned uniform of the abortion clinic. Tommy stopped parallel to the car, lifted the revolver, and as the woman stared at him with frozen mortal fear in her eyes, Tommy shot twice. Glass sprayed. The bullets hit the center of her head, which jerked with the impacts. She leaned heavily into the passenger seat and her car drifted across the intersection. Barely able to hold on to the steering wheel because his arms had no feeling, Tommy crept forward in the opposite direction and then wound through the city to his room.

Once, he killed an abortionist in Bellingham, Washington who had fallen on hard times.

Within a year, Tommy became stealthier and took pains to work with surgical precision and not be caught. He also drifted into a semblance of a social life, because his meticulous surveillance and stalking consumed weeks now, rather than days. He began renting houses and reading in newspapers and online for audition announcements. Almost always, he landed a lead in

the play and stayed in that city for the six or seven weeks necessary to kill at least one abortion worker, and more if it could be done in rapid succession to not allow the police to zero in on him. The relationships he developed with theater personnel and other actors were thin and transient, and he always stayed in character—he was acting off-stage too, so that his true person would never be known. He never bonded with the women he bedded.

As news coverage built up, his public character of the assassin became as famous as it was mysterious. He scored the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List and the government offered a copious award for his capture. Though they did not know who they were looking for, and they were not sure it was one person only, they named him Octopus. As this occurred, Tommy slowed his pace of killing, but by then, copycats had sprung up around the country, and while many of them were caught, they killed, and as decoys provided camouflage and diversion for him. The press waxed hysterical and the authorities began suspending civil liberties to better trap him.

He often thought of Beth, until the memory of her became less about reality and true events, and more the remembering of fixed remembrances and fantasies, and glimpses of ghosts. His recollections had become more real to him than Beth herself had been. He strove to stop the memories and move forward, but they—the phantoms—followed him everywhere.

Refused peaceable dissuasion from vandalizing an attic.

We are waiting along the corner of a frozen lake. Suddenly, a car drives onto the lake and does not sink. It is an older car with a loud engine, and I can see three people in it; the driver is a reckless young man in his late teens. He apparently does not care who dies. One passenger is a blonde girl. The car makes a fast loop, always seeming to find the thicker ice, and when it comes near on my left, it breaks through. The car drifts a moment and then plunges below the surface, bubbling. I jump into the water and swim to the bottom, which is not deep. It is light enough to see, and the people are trapped, unconscious. I grab the girl and bring her to the bank of the lake. Bystanders pull her from the water. By now another bystander has jumped in and he pulls out the other passenger. I go back into the water for the driver. With all my strength, I heave him to the surface. I never feel the cold.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

From a hot air balloon looking east toward Mt. Pisgah.

Chapter 17
Recruitment

One morning early in August, two days after his first wedding anniversary, while daylight tinted the eastern horizon and Stan lightly slumbered in bed in a cabin on the Mollicoat Estate, he heard tapping on the door. He blearily stumbled to answer the summons, cracked open the door, and saw Dr. Sterne. Stan quickly pulled on pants, stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and shivered. Sterne whispered, "I need to talk with you. Dress quickly. Wear a jacket. You might want a warm hat."

Stan obeyed quietly, trying not to awaken Mindy and the baby. He stuck a toothbrush in his pocket. When he opened the door to leave, Mindy's frowsy, sleepy voice floated from the bedroom, "Happy birthday, Stan. Enjoy the surprise."

Dr. Sterne was waiting on the porch. "Let's go," he said.

They walked side by side. When well away from the cabin, Dr. Sterne explained. "I've arranged for you to take the morning off from groundskeeping work. And I have a birthday present for you."

"Can I guess?"

"If you like."

"I don't know. Fishing on the ocean?"

Dr. Sterne said nothing, but led Stan to a car—a top-of-the-line black Mercedes, its engine running—and they drove downhill out the main exit of the conference grounds. Stan was full of questions, but he felt that everything would be answered. His father-in-law carried about him significant mysteries, and Stan had confidence that Sterne would tell him about them when and if it was essential. Without speaking, they drove back roads west toward the coastal Oregon mountains, while Stan ate the egg and ham biscuits Dr. Sterne had brought from the conference center's kitchen.

Presently, Sterne turned onto a dirt road through a gate into a pasture, and at the edge was parked a van. On the back of the

van hung a trailer-like attachment, but without wheels. Two men got out of the van and one released a red helium-filled balloon. At a certain altitude, it began a slow float east. Stan stood by as the men and Dr. Sterne unloaded a wicker gondola from the attachment to the van and unrolled a huge multicolored balloon envelope. They efficiently assembled the gondola parts, attached the burner, filled the balloon with air from a fan, and began firing the burner, which made a roaring and hissing sound. The envelope leaned up and stood erect. Before long, Dr. Sterne motioned for Stan to climb aboard, which he did; the two anonymous men stepped back and the balloon lifted from the ground. The earth dropped below and the balloon sailed over the green-field and tree-hedge landscape that had been sectioned by narrow roads and creeks.

"They'll follow us," Dr. Sterne said at last. "The men will. You're brave in your way, Stan. You trust me."

"You're trustworthy."

"How can you tell?"

"Instinct, I guess."

"Well, I'm licensed to fly a hot air balloon and carry passengers. I like winged aircraft, but I love flying lighter-than-air craft much more. But . . . we know I'm not talking about my piloting abilities."

Dr. Sterne fired the burner, and Stan felt a hot radiance pressing the back of his neck. He looked straight down for the first time, felt a flutter in his stomach, and dropped to his knees and leaned his chin on the leather sheathing of the gondola. He watched the scenery pass below. Everything, no matter how commonplace, took from this perspective an aspect of adventure, romance, and beauty. Thrilled to the marrow, he waited until at last Dr. Sterne spoke.

"This is supposed to be a birthday surprise. But it's more. It's a chance to talk in privacy."

Stan did not look up from the ground.

"How old are you, Stan?"

"Twenty-fi— Um, twenty-six."

"Let me ask you a question. Is there anything that would change your mind about the rightness of having married Mindy?"

Stan turned toward Dr. Sterne. Stan had been relaxed and dreamy, gazing over the world, but now a lurch of fear shot through him, and not a fear of heights.

"Not unless I have fallen into a family of people who are not what they seem. Like . . . vampires."

"What about more than they seem?"

"Well, Dr. Sterne, what's your secret?"

"Stan, it's my turn to trust you, and I pray that my research, and analysis, and yes, my instincts, too, haven't been mistaken."

Stan thought "research and analysis" was odd, but he replied, "Dr. Sterne, you have blessed me beyond my hopes, and your daughter has given me a son. I'm thankful you provided a place for us to live and a job when I lost my income, and I'm enjoying the outdoor work. I'm happier than I thought possible, and if you wish to tell me something that puts your reputation in danger, you can trust me; but is this thing consistent with your life as I've seen it?"

"Yes. I believe it is."

"Then fire away. I'm ready."

Dr. Sterne fired the burner again in short bursts and moments later the balloon began to climb higher. The horizon widened, and in the distance, Stan could see the volcanic peaks eastward above the morning clouds.

"We are a bit more than a thousand feet above our launch elevation," Sterne said.

Stan made a quizzical expression.

"What I am about to tell you, Stan, I say at great risk to me, to my family—to Mindy—and to many good people and their families. Pledge me your word that you will not discuss these matters with anyone except in my presence and not without my express permission."

"Okay."

"Even when threatened by torture and death."

Stan stood up, faced Sterne, and held tightly to the upright of the gondola. "Torture and death? Is it that serious?"

"You can't guess how serious," Sterne said with quiet forcefulness.

Stan moaned with an exhaled breath. He paused. He did not entirely believe Sterne about any danger, but he said, "I give you my pledge. Silence it is."

"Okay. Just listen without interrupting, please. I am a member of the *true* government of the United States of America. This government operates underground, in secret, and with the aid of other nations allied with us. For years now the U.S. Government has been supplanted by people who have subverted the Constitution. A quiet revolution replaced our Republic with something else. This took place gradually, and people—many of them—welcomed this revolution, not knowing what was happening, but accommodating the eroding of common morality and liberty. We consider what happened—and it's still happening—as seditious, traitorous, and illegal. What's now in control is what we call the Government in Power, or GiP."

Stan wondered if Sterne was making all this up or if he was deranged.

Sterne was continuing. "At first you may think that I'm deranged or what we are doing leads to anarchy, but consider: the true government has members from every walk of life, many in positions of authority. Policemen, military leaders, a few congressmen, county commissioners, sheriffs, and judges. Our numbers aren't large, but our influence within the GiP is significant—things would be much worse otherwise.

"Primarily, we are waiting for the GiP to collapse from the weight of its own internal corruption and its destructive effects on society, which will put it out of favor with the people. We're ready to take the reins when such disintegration occurs—not to overthrow the GiP, but to rescue the Republic when the GiP is weakened beyond hope of recovery. Thus, we stand ready against enemies from within and without. And if there's opportunity, or things get too bad, we might stage a coup—bloodless, if possible—to complete the collapse before our enemies do too much harm. But of *this* course, we are not certain, and we ourselves are divided. I'll tell you an additional item: one of our members is a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. And this gives you a clue to our strength. We're fulfilling our God-mandated authority in opposition to an insolent, lawless government. It's explained in John Calvin's *Institutes*—the duty

of lesser magistrates, they who are the appointed guardians of the people, to 'curb the tyranny of kings.'"

Stan felt sick and overwhelmed. "I don't understand the point of the reference."

"I know that this is a lot to take in." Sterne fired the burner again and when the roar ceased, he continued. "Many teachers say citizens should obey Romans 13 in the Bible when it says to submit to the governing authorities, because all authority is God-given. But most of those teachers don't believe that passage in Romans when it says the true authorities punish evil-doers and protect the innocent.

"This is a description of authentic authority. When a government in power does *not* punish evil-doers and protect the innocent, when a government is a terror to *good* works and *not* to the evil, that government is illegitimate and must be resisted. To the degree that the GiP fulfills its mandate, and in the areas where it fulfills its mandate, to that degree and in those areas, we submit. To the degree a government rebels against the divine order, it has lost its authority to that same degree. In those areas we must rebel, because rebellion against rebellion is submission to the Creator. We must obey the law. But in an increasing number of areas, our country has abandoned the law, and abandoned the basis for law, which is The United States Constitution. The GiP, to a large extent, resists the ordinance of God. Therefore, it leads its adherents toward damnation, as the Romans passage says. Our present cause is, in many underlying respects, identical to the cause of the first American Revolution."

Sterne paused a moment, perhaps thinking of how to conclude.

"Here is one of our functions: we arrest and punish evildoers whose lawlessness is sanctioned, protected, licensed, and applauded by the GiP."

Stan was speechless trying to absorb all this, and several minutes passed. His political horizons had just been expanded, or more accurately, his worldview now engulfed vast new territory, if what Dr. Sterne said was true.

Sterne waited for this information to sink in and for Stan to respond. Stan made faces as he figured out what he should say from among the multitude of thoughts whirling around him. At last he spoke. "It sounds like a secret society, like the Masons."

"A few of us are Masons—I'm not. Some—most—of us are Christians, Stan, but some are Jews; some among us are Muslims and others atheists or deists, Mormons, and a smattering of Hindus and Buddhists. We all share a love of our Republic, and of liberty and righteousness, and we are dedicated to re-establishing a society that conforms to the rule of law—not the Ten Commandments exactly, but based on them—as our founders were at the beginning. And, like them, we are willing to die, if necessary."

Sterne had said all of this calmly. He waited for more of Stan's questions.

"What . . . What if you aren't able to peacefully assume power?" Stan said. "Won't there be violent resistance?"

"It may be that the movement of society will be such that there's consensus again on morality. But I don't expect it. Pro-death people may fight to preserve their right to kill. They'll organize a devilish version of the Underground Railroad, and there will be domestic terrorism from the anarchists. We've collected massive quantities of data to assist hunting down and arresting them. In the matter of abortion, we know we must employ educational and relief efforts, so women will not risk suicide by resorting to back-alley practitioners. The irony is that some who now kill not-yet-born children under a charade of legality will be the future back-alley butchers."

"What's the name of your organization?"

"The United States of America. For the sake of discussing ourselves, we utilize various appellations, such as The Organization, or The Assembly, which is short for The Chinook Assembly. We use many pseudonyms."

This whole experience—the striking revelations, and hanging hundreds of feet above the ground, overwhelmed Stan so that he felt he could not receive much more. He managed to ask in a shaky voice, "What does this have to do with me?"

"I've recruited you for a job in our organization."

"You did? What job?"

"That's why we're talking, because your assignment has altered in the past few months."

"Assignment? It sounds as if I have already been recruited."

"You have, but up until this moment you didn't know it."

"Oh, my. What have I gotten into?"

"Nothing you have not enjoyed. Nothing you have objected to in the least." Sterne smiled a little.

"You don't mean being a groundskeeper?"

Dr. Sterne's face split open and he laughed. "No, but the Chinook Center is one of our storefronts—for many of our operations. People come here from all over the world for conferences and workshops, and all this is innocuous and arouses no suspicions in the GiP."

"What else could my work be? You've stumped me."

"I hope it doesn't strike at your pride, Stan, but I recruited you to be a husband to my daughter and father for my grandchildren."

Stan uttered a drawn out "Nooooo," and said, "You can't be serious."

"I am serious. Your relationship with her is all it seems and yet more."

Stan thought this through for a few seconds. This seemed strange in the extreme. He skipped on to a nagging question. "Is Mindy a part of this underground government, too? Yes, surely she is."

"No," Sterne said sharply, "she is not, and that's the point of our conversation. Our original plan was to bring you into the organization, but not until a year from now, or later. Your job is to keep Mindy from knowing of us, but with you living on the Mollicoat Estate, it won't be easy to keep ourselves secret from you both. I've had to bring you further in now for the purpose of securing your cooperation in finding another place to live, and creating a reasonable explanation for the move. The other important job is to participate in our concealment; by which I mean we need you to steer Mindy toward accepting the facades for Chinook Assembly activities. If we had to keep the true purposes from you both, it would be difficult, unless you were to move far away, which, with your present employment situation, is impossible. A charge and conviction of child abuse—that false charge—killed your chances, even though we might eventually find you a job in a private school. Partly why I advised you to plea-bargain was to avoid publicity, and you can understand this now, but also because we had a solution for your

employment need. It's tough never being able to teach again, but I knew we could take care of you."

Stan recollected with a shot of anguish how the State of Washington had brought charges against him for the water tossing incident. Since Stan had pleaded guilty, there was no trial, but the recent court proceedings had been Stan's most humiliating experience. Over the summer, he had sent a dozen applications to schools in the region, and every one had been turned down or ignored. *Maybe I should try to teach in college,* he thought.

Returning to the present, he challenged, "Why? Why tell me, but not Mindy? Your own daughter?"

Dr. Sterne's face clouded and became paler. "Our work is dangerous. If we're discovered, all who are associated with this work will be destroyed. The chances are that many of us would be summarily executed, or worse—tortured to glean information. And if we are actually given a trial and only receive the death penalty, I think we'd call ourselves fortunate. What I want you to do, Stan, is protect my daughter and grandchildren from harm. You are to keep your distance from us. You're to know nothing and do nothing except to be a husband and father. I'll give you a job at the Chinook Assembly with more pay, to allow you to rent a house off campus. You are to reinforce the illusions we create for our operations, and you're to provision a plan of escape to a safe country, if the worst happens."

"This *is* hard to take in," Stan said to himself; more loudly he asked, "Why don't you want Mindy on the inside? Her skills might be useful. Doesn't your attitude show prejudice against her sex? Or would she betray you?"

"No, she wouldn't betray us, not intentionally, and of course we have women working with us. But I'm prejudiced toward children, especially my own and my grandchildren. You have to understand our outlook, Stan. We're in a war, but it's not the final war. If we lose these present battles, we need someone to live on and continue. You and Mindy and your children, and my younger children, are to be survivors if we fail."

Many minutes passed as the land flowed beneath them. Another question came to Stan. "The call in the middle of the

night warning me to stay away from the abortion clinic. You never explained this."

"We . . . we only wanted Mindy to stay away from the killing site, and not bring attention to us. We must remain invisible. We didn't want her license plate to be noted and her put on a list to be watched."

"Makes sense, I guess. Except, if she knew, she would have stayed away."

"Maybe not. Friendship . . . would have trumped caution."

"Who called? Bernard?"

"Probably."

The vacillation in Sterne's manner of talking about Mindy caused Stan to ask, "Is there another . . . reason for excluding Mindy?"

Dr. Sterne did not speak again for several moments, and Stan gave him the space, anticipating some terrible words that needed preparation to utter.

"You know that I'm an MD and trained as a psychologist. Also, I'm a parent, and we usually have more insight into our children than a professional does. We subject every potential recruit to a battery of tests to ensure they are fitted for the work they'll perform. At the beginning, the tests are given without the subject's knowledge, and primarily by observing attitudes, beliefs, and character qualities. The book discussion groups? This is one technique we use. As a parent and as an analyst, I believe that Mindy isn't suited to our work."

"I'm not sure that I understand you."

"Mindy is the oldest child of a large family and she never had the luxury of being the little girl who could play with dolls and enjoy girl talk. She was changing diapers only a few years after she no longer needed them . . ." Here Sterne stopped as if he had begun on a wrong track, but then he restarted. "Mindy sometimes operates by social scruples rather than principles based in the real world. For example, she would have problems with the deceptions we are compelled to use. As she matures, this might change. And, on the other hand, she has the roots of a violent temper."

"Don't we all?"

"My evaluation is that she does not fit the acceptable personality profiles I've developed. I'm afraid if she were given responsibility, and then put under severe trial, she could become unmanageable. Under extreme pressure, it's likely she wouldn't submit to the proper authority and would resort to violence, or else she might prove to be unreliable. Her scruples would be supplanted by the opposite side of convention, which would be expediency, or what would be worse—logic unmitigated by other dimensions, and this is a fanaticism that could undo us."

"What does *that* mean?"

Sterne sighed as if he were weary of explaining. "It means, in our organization—the true government of the U.S.—we balance on a narrow beam, and one false step could plunge us into bloody civil war. Our aim is to prevent war by carefully reversing the degradation of civilization. As conditions worsen, civil liberties are taken by the government to maintain order; when oppression progresses so far, it provokes armed, lawless rebellion. By arresting and putting criminals on trial, and incarcerating them, for example—I mean criminals who run free—we are improving conditions in our culture. And by this we are also gaining more control. I can't safely say more about this to you. I'm sure you understand why. On the other hand, we're preparing so that when the GiP collapses, we are ready to assume leadership. My sons' training—my older sons—and the training of other young men and women in our organization, suits them to govern. I may be wrong, but instinct tells me Mindy would be tempted to use force when it would be disruptive. She has shown herself to be this way. When she was in the sixth grade she punched a boy in the stomach, a boy who was picking on her little sister at a public playground. She knocked the wind out of him, he fell down, and she kicked him. This might be expected for a boy, but it was unusual for a girl. Immediately afterwards, she felt guilty and lifted him back to his feet . . . But this wasn't the only occasion . . ."

Stan raised his eyes to Dr. Sterne, whose own eyes looking over the country below were moist, more than what was usual.

"How can you be sure she would behave this way?"

"I can't. I can't. But I can't take the risk. Maybe in a few years this may change. Either my evaluation will change, or

Mindy will have undergone trials of life to reveal more of her underlying character. In this work, we can afford no mistakes—and I apply the same standards to everyone, even my own children. You may have forgotten, some of Mindy's ancestors were Jews who survived the death camps, and many did not survive. But also, some of my ancestors were Nazis. Not rank and file Nazis, but war criminals. She has that in her blood. And some of my ancestors, Aryan Germans, fought against the Nazis. I have studied this all of my life: holocaust, world war, genocide, and what turns a nation of ordinary people into heartless killers. I fear the repetition of history . . . It's presently happening . . . We hope to stop it."

Dr. Sterne had been staring beyond the horizon, his eyes seeing images from the past. His forehead was clammy and he seemed to have lost his awareness of the present time. Then his vision suddenly came back into focus and he picked up the radio.

"Sterne to Chaser."

"Chaser here."

"Tualatin Memorial Garden. We'll land there. We should arrive within twenty minutes."

"Got that."

A few moments of quiet passed. A hound barked at them from below. The world quietly glided along underneath them and the bright sky in every direction took on an unusual depth.

"What you've said, Dr. Sterne, is far-fetched. How could such a conspiracy like you've described . . . The Assembly, how could it exist? There are too many opportunities for someone to uncover the whole thing."

"The truth is, Stan, our effort could come unraveled at any time. It's a miracle we have lasted this long. I recall you once mentioning the Russian writer Solzhenitsyn. Remember what he said about his years in the Soviet Gulag, that in discussing confidential matters, he never erred in whom he trusted? But this entity that rules our nation presently. *It's* the conspiracy right under people's noses."

"But it has detractors and critics, and defectors."

"Defectors? Who might the defectors be? Can you name one, other than a spy or a domestic terrorist?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Without exception, the vocal opposition politicians are part of the GiP, so far. Real defectors have learned discretion—it's useless or dangerous to talk—and they've joined us. It's complicated. But no one has betrayed us, not yet. There are subtle forces within forces and many layers. But it's simple, too. Sometimes we are so simple and obvious that no one notices."

The balloon drifted over a cluster of oak trees and Dr. Sterne said hurriedly in a low voice, "Do not say anything about this to anyone. For now, you should talk with the Chinook Assembly office manager about a job—we need an assistant editor for our newsletter. In a few weeks, begin talking with Mindy about requiring more privacy, and living space, and that you feel you should have your own place away from her 'wonderful, but enveloping family.' I know you will be as honest as necessary. Meanwhile, be at peace and enjoy life!"

The remainder of the flight was strictly descending and landing the aircraft. A ground-crew member caught a tether and pulled the balloon to a gentle landing onto a cemetery road. Mindy was holding baby Maxwell and had come to greet them, the cemetery being only a few miles from the Mollicoat Estate. Mindy bounded up to Stan after he clambered over the edge of the gondola, and she gave him a one-armed hug and a kiss. Stan took Maxy and tossed him up in the air a couple times. The boy giggled with glee.

"How did you like your birthday surprise, Stan?" Mindy said. "It was my idea."

Stan looked deeply into her cheerful, shining eyes. She knew nothing about her father's radical, secretive, and incredibly important intrigues. She was only a happy, young, beautiful mother, and now he must hide things from her, maybe for the rest of their lives.

Mindy caught the hesitation. "What's wrong, Stan?"

Stan checked his thoughts, smiled and tossed Maxy up again. "Nothing. The balloon flight was an absolute blast, Mindy. It's the best birthday present, ever. And you know what? I'd like to do it again."

Words died away and Stan waited for the first moment when the deflating and packing of the balloon distracted Mindy, and he

flicked his glance upon Dr. Sterne who was watching him. Sterne said nothing, but his eyes said, "Perfect answer."

And Stan could never say that he decided to join this underground government, or revolution, or conspiracy. The choice had come naturally—made for him by someone else without him noticing. However, other than Sterne's sterling reputation and sincerity, Stan had not seen anything to tell him Sterne was telling the truth. He could, after all, be inventing a fantastical lie.

† † †

While he worked on the house-finding chore, Stan brooded over aspects of his conversation in the balloon with Dr. Sterne. Within a month, in September, Stan found an ideal, available cottage on one acre, three miles from the Mollicoat Estate, and he looked forward to getting his bicycle out and riding to work whenever the weather permitted.

After Mindy and he moved into the cottage, Stan made time to talk with Sterne again. They met on the Bluff House balcony overlooking the valley. It was a Saturday afternoon and the house and yard were empty except for a groundskeeper, who Stan suspected was also a security guard. The day was warm and clear. Mindy was at the cottage making lasagna for an evening get-together with a few friends. The men relaxed on chairs and drank ice water in ceramic glasses.

Following some general chit-chat, Stan said, "I've been thinking about your ideas. If you're successful in restoring the government, what plans do you have for economics and trade? What kind of political system will you have?"

"The same as now."

"Well, will you put moral people in leadership by a non-elected process?"

"At first."

"What I don't understand is, you've only treated the symptoms. Immoral people elect immoral leaders. You haven't changed the people. It seems that the only way to stay in control is by becoming ruthless despots."

Punctuating with his finger, Sterne said, "The option then is, do we let chaos rule, or do we step up to restore order? Immoral leaders lead people into greater immorality."

"And moral leaders . . . ? If the present leaders are so bad, then why not elect better ones?"

Sterne laughed with evident bitterness. "How is that possible? The public is brainwashed. They want what they are told to want. They are led by their hormones, and the press squelches voices of reason. But remember, we have many secret sympathizers highly placed in the government now in power. These are experienced people who love their country. I'm afraid the only thing that will shake the population into self-restraint is for people to suffer the consequences of their behavior. Suffering and pain can be cleansing. When a person is sick—when he has undergone a serious blow—and his strength has fled, he is humbled and is able to think about what's most important in life. With the current rate of social decay, unless there is repentance, our economy will take a sharper turn for the worse; there will be devastating unemployment. New illnesses will emerge and old ones mount a resurgence. People will be jailed for trivial matters or for speaking the truth. Terrorist groups will begin attacking in our neighborhoods. But when terrorists gain control of the government? We're presently moving in that direction."

"But I just think that we shouldn't change the government, apart from the constitutional method; that is, by elections, as long as elections are possible."

"Could we have abolished slavery in this country by the political process?"

Stan thought before answering. "War was inevitable. Forces moved, and it seems that no one could have stopped them."

"The right to bear arms is constitutional, Stan . . . Actually, the political process worked fine until the Federal government determined to preserve the Union. States tried to break away nonviolently, but Lincoln wouldn't allow it. What if he had allowed the Confederacy to stand? We might have followed England and had a nonviolent abolition of slavery, and in time, the United States would have been reunited. We wouldn't have had 150 years of racial hatred. Lincoln had the right cause, but

the wrong method. In this present case, the Federal government represents the wrong cause *and* the wrong method. In 1973 the United States Supreme Court overthrew laws in 37 states that protected women and pre-born children from abortion. It denied person status to every child before he was born, and extended the right to murder over the whole nation. Essentially this was a Unionist act usurping the political process. A crucial difference between 1860 and 1973 is that states submitted to the Federal government over abortion. But attitudes have changed dramatically since 1973. In our day the dividing line is not between North and South, but everywhere, within every community. Pockets of people are resisting this imposition of evil within their domains. In a few cases, it comprises a plurality of a state legislature quietly waiting for the right moment, or it may be private individuals who realize their civic and humanitarian duty. What we have, then, is a secessionist movement married to a new abolitionist movement, as if the South wished to secede in order to *prohibit* slavery."

"Will this mean a war?"

"I hope not. Really, I hope not. But it depends upon what the Government in Power does.

"Ohhh. It seems messy. I'd like to forget about all this and live peaceably."

"Wouldn't we all, Stan? Wouldn't we all. But you're forgetting. Innocent blood is being shed as we speak, not far from here. There already is a war, against pre-born children, and so far we've done next to nothing about this slaughter. It is possible, Stan, that under harsh conditions, people will reject self-indulgence and cry for courageous moral leaders, but by then, people may be powerless to change anything but their own internal lives. We in the Assembly do not wish to create suffering, but we know it's inevitable. Compassion sometimes causes pain. I've seen this in the practice of medicine. Yes, we will encounter loud and even violent resistance; and our nation will reap what we have sown."

Stan thought in silence. All of what Sterne said made sense, but it was in no way satisfactory. There had to be an escape. And the nation was far more complex and resilient than what Sterne depicted. Stan had so many ideas turning inside his head

he did not know what to say next and so he jumped in with, "Surely something unexpected will come up. New technology for example, to . . . to . . . I don't know. To boost the economy and increase stability."

"While technology increases, our human strength decreases. It might be a hundred years before what we predict will happen, or six years. But meanwhile, we must live ethically and with integrity. It's a matter of loving our neighbor."

"That brings up a point. What about the church?"

"What do you mean by the church?"

"Those who believe in Christ?"

"What do you mean by 'believe'?" Sterne pressed.

"Those who believe he is the Son of God, those who follow his teaching, those who imitate his life?" Stan was beginning to feel exasperated by Sterne's questions.

"Those who meet on Sunday morning? Is this the church?"

"Not entirely. You know what I mean."

"I'm sorry if I seem finicky. We finite humans can't really know what is or is not the true church of Christ, because it is invisible. At best, we can attempt to define it. We see professing Christians, we see more or less orthodox creeds, but only God knows the hearts of individuals. The true church is not only made up of believers who are alive today, but of those throughout history. And I say to you, Stan, that the *visible* church is weak, despite commercial success."

Up until now, Sterne had been calm. He usually spoke without intense emotion, but in his next words he became animated and his speech variable in rhythm and tone. Stan saw glimpses of powerful conviction and hidden power and he felt afraid, as if the quiet land—the unmovable earth—had begun to quake. Sterne's hands moved emphatically, matching his words, not as if he were on a stage in an auditorium, but intimately, as if he were in a consulting room at his doctor's office.

He said, "The visible church—that which we see—is fat, happy, and self-absorbed, more concerned about crooning love songs for Jesus than it is about obeying his teaching. Jesus said that birds have nests and foxes their dens, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. This world is not our home, and Christians today have made themselves comfortable here. They

imitate the world. Their music is like the world's music, but sanitized. They do not seek truth or beauty, but rather titillation and conformity, but not so immoral as to make them feel guilty. They feel good because their indulgences are not as bad as the world's indulgences. Their debauchery is not as bad as the world's debauchery. They are cultural relativists. And you can see the results in their children, who are being lost to the faith. These Christians chase an imaginary Jesus, rather than imitate the true Christ. Remember, Jesus said that he would come to rule on earth, and that he would bring not peace but a sword. The troubles ahead first are to purify the church. Only when the visible church repents can it lead our nation into repentance. My complaints are directed against what passes for Christianity, more than against the Government in Power. My feelings are tinged with bitterness because the pastors and teachers lead their people astray. They are false shepherds—wolves in shepherd's clothing. Where is the Church Militant?—Christians engaged in spiritual warfare?"

Sterne ceased speaking, and he settled back into his usual humble manner. He knew his limitations and weaknesses.

"Do you have personal experience with this?" Stan asked.

"Once, I worked to reform the church . . . But not anymore. Let the dead bury their dead."

Again, Stan could not find any of his own thoughts, so full was he of Sterne's. But this last comment raised a question that newly occurred to Stan. "How did you get involved in the work of cultural, governmental . . . renewal?"

"That's a good question." Sterne formulated his answer. "In high school, my best friend got his girlfriend pregnant, and her parents took her to an abortion mill. Afterwards, my friend and I drifted apart—much like you with your friend, the actor. Have you heard from him? No? Well, I learned about the abortion when I found Jane, the girl, walking alone drunk in her neighborhood at night. I called another girl, and we brought her here to the Mollicoat Estate, to the log mansion. We lit a fire in the fireplace and talked long into the next morning. When I witnessed her suffering, I decided to begin what is my life work, and to buy the Mollicoat Estate. Later on, when I was in college,

I asked Jane to marry me, but she refused. She knew we were not best for each other."

Sterne hesitated a few seconds, and then closed by saying, "Isn't it odd that our beliefs often follow our behavior, rather than our reason? I mean, I did not reason into my work at the beginning, though my ideas are reasonable. But the pattern of our culture is to organize beliefs around justifying bad, apathetic, or cowardly behavior. Or just preferences and habits."

So it was that while Stan still wondered how Dr. Sterne rose to leadership in an underground movement—perhaps it was that Sterne seemed to pierce through humbuggery, and apparently motivated the best in people—and Stan also wondered what Sterne meant by the enigmatic reply about his church experience, he did not bring these subjects up with Sterne again. Later that evening, Stan asked Mindy about his work in the church. All she could say was, "Maybe this was before I was born. We've always gone to small churches and he didn't get much involved. He didn't like meetings and he was always too busy, anyway."

Every year the Chinook Assembly organized an international folk festival in a different city around the world. This summer's festival was held in Portland, with the city itself as an official host. A dozen of the folk dancing events took place at the Mollicoat Estate in the large hall with wooden floors. Stan and Mindy joined many of the classes and dances in the evening, and when the festival was over they became part of a dance club, along with her brother Anselm and his fiancé, Coral, and also Bernard, Bennett Uchida and Sarah. The club specialized in English Playford dances. Stan would not have done this had Mindy not begged him, saying, "Please, we don't have to dance forever, just a couple years and I'll be ready to move on to something else, like teaching our children."

Stan went along and enjoyed himself. Often as not, on the weekend dances he hung around the edges of the spinning movement and held their baby, and swayed in time with the music while Mindy danced.

The next year's folk festival was to be held in Prague, Czech Republic, and though it was almost a year away, Stan and

Mindy's dance team looked forward to attending for the final week, and they hoped to take another week to explore that part of Europe. Bennett began studying Czech.

Dr. Sterne arranged to meet Stan privately to discuss this social involvement and when they got together Sterne looked displeased. "Stan, this dance effort, while fun and edifying, has the primary function of communication and travel for conducting operations. Many dance team members are with us. I rather wish you could put your foot down and withdraw, because otherwise it will be difficult—to keep Mindy from guessing."

"It's only dancing," Stan said with annoyance. "We can't sit around and do nothing. Besides, it's too late to change. I can't invent a plausible reason for quitting, but I'll be careful."

"Well, then, stay on your designated path! Don't look too hard, don't ask questions, and don't forget!"

+ + +

Fall and early winter moved along, full with the details of work and abundant day-by-day responsibilities. Stan remained on the periphery of the Assembly, knowing that the comings and goings of staff members, conferees, and visitors at the Mollicoat Estate meant far more than they appeared. Writing and editing the Chinook newsletter bored him after a few months—and he ended up taking charge of travel arrangements for visitors from around the world, which included meeting them at the airport and taking them on tours of Portland. Stan was far more occupied and fulfilled, however, in being husband and father. The cottage off campus was away from the hubbub, and Stan went home at the end of every day and reveled in family life, while pretending his work meant no more than it seemed. Sterne one day suggested that Stan find a job elsewhere and move his family further away from the Mollicoat Estate, perhaps to attend graduate school, but it did not seem possible.

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In late February, a heavy snowstorm fell on Portland and shut down the city. The temperatures were the coldest ever recorded for the Northwest. Stan trudged through snow banks and ice to work and back home, and the quiet, productive hours in his

office and the exercise made him feel calm and strong. He listened to recorded movie scores and worked on his old screenplay late into the evenings.

Winter passed. Mindy was satisfied with being a wife and mother and staying at home. She shopped locally, which kept her close, but she went into the city once a week to record anthro-political interviews for the University radio station. Spring brought turmoil on the North American continent, as the disintegration of individual lives and families undermined the stability of larger institutions. Still, life flourished in niches, such as where Stan and Mindy dwelt. In late April, they conceived their second child and Mindy cut back on her outside work, though she kept up with folk dancing. Her father, as doctor, reluctantly told her this would be safe enough, seeing that she had been dancing all along and that she glided in her steps.

Spring lingered, but summer blasted hot and the weather produced record temperatures of 115 degrees Fahrenheit coming on successive days. Crime incidents were up, as were divorces, child abuse, and poverty, as society unraveled almost imperceptibly to those in its midst. Roving gangs committing robbery, and the frequency of break-ins in well-to-do neighborhoods surged. The private residential communities around the Northwest began erecting high fences around their perimeters, and the Mollicoat Estate followed the trend. Stan convinced his parents to sell their home and move into an apartment on the estate for their well-being and safety. His father and mother began working on the grounds, she maintaining flowerbeds and he mowing. Because it had been built somewhat as a fortress, the Sternes kept their Columbia River house, but hired an armed security guard and they stayed there less often than before; it was only a matter of time before they would sell the house, if they could, and move to the estate as well. The monthly book discussions continued as always.

Stan and Mindy stayed in their cottage off-campus, feeling safe in the rural environment. In late summer, they strolled in the nearby fields and picked sweet, wild blackberries growing in the hedgerows.

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Even in the worst circumstances, a semblance of normalcy continues, and so the dance festival in Prague went forward, and in September everyone in the extended Sterne family grew excited about the trip. All of the family members of the dance club were to go, plus Sarah and Bennett's three children, and Stan and Mindy's child, Max. Two of Mindy's sisters—the twins—came along to assist with the Timmons child, who was just over 15 months old and walking everywhere. It would take both of the 16-year-old girls to keep up with him. Dr. and Mrs. Sterne were staying at home.

Stan delighted in what differed from his heretofore unadventurous, untraveled life. He enjoyed flying with loved ones around in the cumbersome airbuses from Portland to New York, and on to Denmark, ending in Prague, and he was not annoyed by the tiring waits. The children seemed contented and well behaved, which garnered complimentary remarks from elderly passersby.

They checked into the Grand Hotel Bohemia. The evening dancing of their section of the festival—British Isles and Anglo American—would be held in the hotel's ornate ballroom. The hotel was located in Old Prague, within walking distance of the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of this marvelously preserved and renovated city, and for Stan to share this with Mindy was a tremendous pleasure. Every morning featured dance classes; every afternoon there were performances throughout the city or neighboring towns, or free time to tour; and every night at Hotel Bohemia ended with the British and Anglo-American teams turning out in neo-traditional costumes—the women in flowing gowns and the men in woolen or linen pants and simple long-sleeve shirts—to dance in one excited group, filling the floor, while the living music stole away their weariness.

The team from Portland had only one afternoon performance, and this was at a Baroque chateau outside the town of Benesov, forty kilometers south of Prague. The festival provided vans and drivers for dancers and musicians. The audience was small, containing a smattering of local Scottish dance enthusiasts and a few American and German tourists, but primarily was made up of several classes of the town's school children. Despite the half filled dance hall, the team felt they had not wasted their time,

because afterwards a couple dozen children stayed to ask questions in English about the United States. The children, some of high school age, asked to be taught a dance and the team happily obliged.

For a few of their free afternoons, Mindy wanted to stay in their room and nap, and she often missed an activity when she felt tired because of her pregnancy.

But Stan and Mindy took two afternoons to wander the old town center of Prague on foot. They walked, sat, and watched people, and listened to street musicians while Stan sipped beer. They slowly climbed a spire of the St. Vitus Cathedral to see the golden sun setting through haze over the red-tile roofed city. Then they bought a meal of roasted beef and garlic cloves with bread and fried cheese patties from an outdoor vendor. Toward the week's end, they caught a taxi for the short ride to the Jewish Quarter. After an hour, Stan wanted to go on to visit the concentration camp memorial/museum at Terezin—a village the Nazis had turned into a ghetto and depot for shipping Czech Jews to Auschwitz and other death camps—but there was not time. Mindy said they could go another day and she was relieved to see their gaudy yellow Art Nouveau hotel front.

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The last night of their week—Saturday night—was the climax and conclusion of the festival. Teams from around the world gathered at the Prague Cultural Center's ballroom to perform, and the place was packed with tourists and locals.

In the middle of the evening, a young United States Senator—Senator M—who had been in Europe on a credibility-building junket in his bid to become the U.S. president—took the podium, interrupting the festivities, and delivered an awkward address about diversity and world peace.

As midnight approached, all the teams joined in a dance that had been commissioned and composed for the occasion with original music, combining traditional elements and movements from many cultures. The dance teams had been practicing this finale dance in their home countries, with only one mass rehearsal for moving everyone onto the floor. The performance was to be its world debut. All of the performers were nervous,

but the dance came off splendidly, better than anyone had imagined. The choreographer, a Czech national, and the composer, a musician of Roma ancestry, both wept at the microphone after the dance, and they embraced each other to keep from falling, and the festival ended with heartfelt hope in nearly all present that beauty would reign on earth.

The Portland travelers had danced along with everyone through the evening—only Bernard was absent toward the end. Afterwards, pleasantly tired, Stan and Mindy decided to not socialize with the people hanging around, but instead return to their hotel. Supposedly, there was a group throwing a dance beginning at midnight and lasting all night nearby in the city and they decided to skip that as well. Stan was thirsty, and with Mindy on his arm, he looked for something to drink. They strolled to the refreshment tables. Volunteers were packing things away and only coffee was left.

Stan said, "It's hard to keep from dehydrating."

"You better find some water," Mindy said.

"I don't like the water. Look, here's decaf."

Stan poured a cup three-quarters full, topped it with milk, and gulped it down. He made a second cup in the same way; Mindy had a glass of ice water brought to her and they walked outside to catch a taxi for the ride back to the Grand Bohemia.

A half-hour later in their rooms, while Stan fidgeted with the television's remote control, he heard a knock on their door. Mindy had dressed for bed and had dozed off while reading a guide book. Her lips were parted and she nodded in a slow rhythm, but she woke at the knocking.

"Bennett," Stan said, surprised, when he opened the door. "Is anything wrong? You look . . . pale."

"No, I'm great. I wanted to check if you were alright. We . . . I didn't see you come in."

"Yeah, we're about to go to bed. But, I just drank two cups of regular coffee by mistake. Darn, it must have been mislabeled. I'm jittery and may not be able to sleep."

"Oh, really? Okay. You have a good night."

"You, too. You better get some rest."

"See you."

Stan closed the door. "Let's go out," he said. "I *cannot* sleep."

"Oh, I'm tired," Mindy said groggily.

"Let's get dressed and go out for some air. I feel like I'll be awake all night."

Mindy sighed, sat up slowly and put her feet on the floor. "Only because you're my husband . . . and I had a good nap."

In a few minutes, they rode the elevator down to the lobby and walked outside onto the sidewalk. The sky seemed to threaten rain, but Stan had brought an umbrella. Few people were out at this hour—most who were still conscious were ensconced in bars and clubs. Arm-in-arm, Mindy and Stan strolled in step, their bodies comfortably pressing together at their sides. They went a block, and another, and the further they walked the emptier the streets became.

"We're close to the all-night dance. You want to watch?" Stan asked.

"No. Here's a bench; let's sit awhile and go back soon."

"Okay."

The streets were vacant. No one else was on the sidewalks now. No cars passed. No music or sounds of voices came their way. Stan heard the leaves above whispering rumors among the trees that were planted in small squares of ground along the street. Mindy rested her head on Stan's shoulder and closed her eyes. Stan leaned to kiss her.

Mindy jerked her head violently forward, hitting Stan in the nose. At the same instant, he yelled, not in pain, but in fear, as roar and shock wave immersed them. They looked in disbelief at a spot a block away where a concentrated white-hot conflagration sent black smoke and fire into the air. Pieces of metal clanged onto the pavement. Flaming chunks of cinder shot up and drifted toward them. The heat on their faces burned and they held up their hands for protection. Flickering orange light reflected from the buildings and windows.

"What the hell!?" Stan yelled, jumping up. He stared open-mouthed. "Let's get away!"

Mindy stood up beside him, "We have to see if someone's hurt!"

By then, a few people were running toward the scene. A sudden thought jammed Stan's mind, a recollection of the

conversations with Dr. Sterne about keeping Mindy from danger and trouble. A realization that they should not be out here.

"Let's go back! Others will take care . . . of this."

Another explosion rocked the air. Mindy and Stan flung up their arms uselessly to ward off the shock wave. "Let's leave!" Stan shouted and began pulling Mindy in the direction of their hotel. She stopped resisting and they jogged along as emergency and police vehicles, sirens screaming, passed them in the opposite direction.

The lobby was nearly empty of people when Mindy and Stan entered.

"Your nose is bleeding," Mindy said.

Stan touched his lip with a finger and looked at the red dab. Blood spotted his shirt. "Shouldn't you try to sleep? You and the baby need rest."

"I won't sleep, not after that. I want to learn what happened." Mindy was close to tears.

Stan put his arm around her. "I can't sleep either. Let's wait here."

"Do something about your nose."

Stan ran upstairs to clean his face and change his shirt. The bleeding had stopped, and after he checked Max, who was sleeping next to one of the twins, he came back downstairs. Mindy had rinsed her face with cold water in the lobby bathroom and was waiting. In a short while, a handful of guests and hotel personnel assembled in the lobby, now buzzing with questions and the exchange of information and misinformation. Stan and Mindy told and retold what they had seen—no one else had witnessed the explosion.

Sarah was the only other person present from the Sterne clan. She said that Bennett had been restless, which kept her awake, and she had heard the explosion from her open window and had come down to the lobby to see what she could learn. She hugged Stan and Mindy, saying, "I'm so relieved you're safe! You look like you've been in the sun."

Mindy felt her cheeks and said, "The explosion—the fire was so hot! We were a whole block away!"

After an hour, answers were no more forthcoming than at first, and Stan and Mindy retired and were able to fall asleep for

awhile. At breakfast the story unfolded: U.S. Senator M had been murdered—blown up in his car en-route to the airport.

A shadowy, rightist Jewish association claimed responsibility, and then a faction of the group promptly denied it, while in the same statement it blasted the Senator for his decadent pro-Palestinian, pro-infanticide, pro-homosexual advocacy. Miraculously, no one else had been seriously hurt in the explosion, but the white fire of the ambassadorial vehicle in which the senator had been riding burned with such intensity that his body was incinerated, and his wedding ring and teeth fillings—what had not been vaporized—had melted into a scant film of dirty gold on the scorched cobblestones. A Secret Service agent and the driver for the Senator could be found nowhere, and it was thought that they had been parties to the killing. The city and the world were shocked. Fortunately for the festival, the press did not link it with the assassination, except to briefly mention the stark contrast between the festival and that reprehensible act.

The next day, their last full day in Prague, while the others in their group polished off the major sites of the city before they all were to travel south for the village of Cesky Krumlov, near the Austrian border, Stan and Mindy wearily took an early bus to tour Terezin, also called Theresienstadt.

They walked slowly into and around the "Little Fort," which had been a police prison at the edge of the ghetto of Terezin. Many of the inmates had been resistors against the Nazis. Stan was impressed with how empty and bleak it was, and how flat the buildings seemed to be against the sky. He tried to hear the echoes of voices raised in suffering those 70 years ago. The grass and weeds growing on the roofs and the blood-red roses in the memorial field outside the prison walls only emphasized the deadness. After the tour, they walked back to the village that had been the ghetto proper. People lived here now in these yellow, pink, and gray buildings and carried on with their lives normally where thousands once died of disease and starvation in horribly crowded conditions, and where multiple tens of thousands once waited to be shipped to slave labor camps to be murdered. Mindy went through the primary ghetto museum while Stan sat on a bench inside, next to the gift shop and tried to

read sections in a guide book. He closed his eyes, falling in and out of sleep. When Mindy spoke his name and said it was time to return to Prague, Stan woke feeling refreshed, until dread seized him as he recalled the events of the previous night.

They did not have the time or energy to tour the ghetto art museum.

While Stan had often wondered what Sterne's operation might be in Prague, or if there even was an operation, when the word spread through the Grand Hotel Bohemia that Senator M was killed, it never crossed his mind that assassination would be the Assembly's objective. But while Mindy took a nap in their rooms, he reviewed the arrivals and departures of Bennett and Anselm at the hotel and recalled their words and reactions. They could not hide the facts that they were tense before the bombing, relieved afterwards, and were not upset about the killing. Their behavior was consistent with the idea that they knew about the bombing ahead of time and had played a part in it. But Stan could not imagine they would not show remorse, no matter what the Senator's sins had been—and guilty effects did not show in the men's manner or conduct. Contrariwise, they almost wore smirks on their faces, as if they had just successfully pulled a stunning schoolyard prank.

In the late afternoon, Prague detectives and an Interpol investigator came by to interview Stan and Mindy for a half hour. They told what little they saw, and the police left.

Stan was angry, because if Sterne's organization had been involved in the assassination, then it had moved into utterly unacceptable extremism. But how could he confront Sterne and company? Or should he? If they were as heartless and evil as this, would he and Mindy be in danger? Would they actually hurt Sterne's own daughter and son-in-law? Stan was confused by the conflicting realities, if real they were. He approached Anselm at supper at the hotel and pulled him aside to whisper, "What do you know about the assassination?"

Anselm said blandly, "Unlike you, I wasn't there."

Stan grabbed Anselm's rock-hard arm and squeezed. "You know what I mean."

Anselm glared ferociously for half a second, and then relaxed. "I shouldn't think about that now, if I were you. Talk to my

father when you get home." Anselm then said, "Trust," and walked away.

But Stan was far from trusting.

Yes, he *could* wait and talk with Dr. Sterne, but perhaps it would be too late; the interval might cool his passion and he would be sucked deeper into this diabolical cult. Stan agonized. Sterne seemed wholly reliable, but on the other hand, a U.S. senator had been murdered, and Mindy and he and their pre-born child had almost been caught in the fire! Why didn't Anselm just give him a flat denial? Stan was confused. He had to find answers. He wanted to talk with Mindy and ask her advice, but this was off limits. And yet, that stricture was of Sterne's construction—part of the conspiracy that had been called into doubt. Here was an untenable conflict: would he trust his father-in-law or his wife? Under these circumstances, until he had more information, he could trust only one of them. Mindy was his closest friend; he had to talk with her to help him determine what they should do. He had to tell her about the Assembly against Sterne's command, against his promise. It had to be. If they were in danger, or if they needed to extricate themselves from the Assembly, they would make plans . . .

That was his decision.

He waited until near midnight when they were alone in their rooms. Maxy was staying with his cousins and young aunts in another room. Mindy seemed to have been waiting to talk, and she plopped on the sofa in her robe and Stan sat in the chair beside the sofa.

"I have to talk with you and there's so much to say," Stan said. "I don't know how to begin."

"Then just begin."

"I have been deceiving you for over a year. Not big deceptions, and nothing about me, but your own family."

"How could you deceive *me* about *my* family?"

"You'll be surprised."

"First, I need to confess," she said. "You haven't been keeping anything from me. I've been hiding family secrets from *you*."

Trembling, Stan stood up and blurted, "What do you know?"

"Probably as much as you. Probably more." She smiled.

"Wait!" Stan said and went to the door and peered through the peephole. He turned around. "Okay. Tell me."

"I *do* have eyes and ears," she said with muted fierceness. "Ever since I was little, I knew my parents hid from me a lot of what was important to them. Early on, I asked questions, and as I grew older, I realized the answers weren't good ones. It's like when a child discovers the Sand Man and the Tooth Fairy are not real, but the parents still play the games. Or like when a girl learns about the birds and the bees, but the parents don't know she knows. I stopped asking questions, but I kept watching. I figured that my father didn't want me to know about his underground work and that he had good reasons for not telling me. Also, I knew he included my brothers. I felt jealous, but said nothing. I never said anything. I kept my own secrets."

"So, did you know that I'd been inducted, more or less?"

"Yes."

Stan was embarrassed and held up his hand to cover his face when he asked, "When did you discover this?"

"When you climbed off the hot air balloon on your birthday and lied to me."

"Oh."

"I'm experienced in detecting lies. Did my father explain why he excluded me from his work?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about it now. Maybe never. He should be the one to tell you."

"Okay. That's fine," she said, as if it did not matter.

Stan was impressed by his wife's equanimity. Maybe her father was wrong about her. "How much do you know about your dad's activities and the people connected with him?"

"What do I *know*? Nothing for certain, except for guessing. I believe the network is worldwide, and . . . that's all."

"Would he consent to an assassination?"

After a second of mental dawning, her voice rose in pitch. "So, you think the Assembly killed Senator M?" She stared at Stan in alarm, wondering if he might be joking.

"It's possible, don't you think?"

"No!" she said adamantly. "It's not possible! They would never do that," she said to herself, as much as to Stan. "They wouldn't kill anyone, not on purpose."

"I think they killed the Senator."

"No, I said! You're just wrong." Mindy was upset now, and tears squeezed from her eyes. "I don't know how they would justify it. My father's theories would not allow it, not even in a just war." She paused, trying to gain control of her emotions. "Well, they might . . .

No . . . Yes . . . This senator was definitely an enemy of everything my father represents. From what I've read, he was among the worst. He is—was—very popular."

Stan described how he reached his conclusion. They fell to thinking. At last Stan asked, "What should we do?"

"I . . . I think we should talk with Anselm and Bennett."

"Why not wait until we can talk with your father?"

"My brother and Bennett will be more open with us than my father. Maybe there's a good explanation for their behavior."

"What if they won't talk to us?" Stan was beginning to perspire from nervousness.

"I have an idea to make them talk."

They dressed in a hurry, walked hand-in-hand to the elevator, and rode up to Anselm and Bernard's suite and knocked. Despite the late hour, Anselm immediately came to the door, alert and tense, wearing dark clothing. He did not invite them in. Without any obvious signal from Anselm, Bennett came out into the hallway similarly dressed. Bernard followed into the corridor, closed the door quietly, and stood to the side without speaking.

"Uh . . . We need, need, to talk with you-you," Stan stammered.

Anselm smiled and said, "Can't it wait until morning? We're just going out for a few minutes."

Stan glanced back down the hallway to make sure it was empty of other persons. He stepped closely to Anselm and whispered in his ear. The words were quiet, but Mindy and Bennett could hear them: "We believe you were involved in the assassination of Senator M."

Bennett now whispered. "You can't be serious—"

"We are," Mindy said.

Bennett paused a long while, then whispered with extreme politeness, "You've made a distressing accusation, Stan. Your

brother-in-law suggested that you speak with Mr. Sterne when you are home. He's the best person to discuss Prague. But I can assure you as a friend, with perfect honesty, that neither we nor the Assembly have had anything to do with . . . the death of the . . . honorable Senator." His last two words could barely be heard.

"My father has hidden the truth from me my whole life!" Mindy whispered, her cheeks coloring. "If you don't tell us the truth right now, we will report our suspicions to the authorities. We will go downstairs and take a cab to the U.S. embassy."

Stan was surprised. Bennett lost his composure for an instant and breathed in sharply. He swung his eyes to Anselm and they read each other's countenances. There seemed to be a silent dialogue between them, a debate of facial expressions and slight head movements. At last, Anselm shrugged his shoulders and Bennett turned away and rolled his eyes.

"Okay," Anselm said. "I never agreed with Dad about not sharing our secrets with you, Mindy, and since you already know so much"—here he narrowed his eyes at Stan—"come inside."

Anselm led the way with Bennett close behind. Bernard, who was grinning and trying to contain it, eased the door shut after them all and fastened the security latch. They came into the dimly lit main room of the suite. There was a pullout bed, the covers undisturbed. All of Anselm's and Bernard's belongings and luggage were neatly piled in the room's corners, including a computer case with what appeared to be a diminutive steering wheel for a motor vehicle strapped to the side.

Next, they entered the darkened bedroom on the left. On the bed lay a man snoring through his nose with a sound like he might be drowning. Beside the bed on a stand hung a clear bag with a tube running to the man's arm. The man stopped snoring and shifted in his restraints; his hands were bound across his stomach and he wore a gag over his mouth, and a blindfold—which was a sleeping mask for airplane passengers.

Anselm said, "This is Senator M, alive and uninjured."

I am a high school student, and my drama club is meeting in the theater. The teacher and some students are horsing around with lines, gestures, and dance routines from the upcoming play. Auditions begin tomorrow. The play is Shakespeare's The Tempest, as a dance musical. I know that the teacher wants me to join the fun, but I stay back, because I know I'm not physically as flexible as the students she is working with, and the dancing requires moves I can't perform. The teacher has a part for me, and I feel confident about acting, but I have so much else to do in my life that is more important. While everyone else is happy and laughing, I leave quietly and drive away, unnoticed. I decide not to audition.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

Unsigned watercolor of the Charles Bridge. Purchased in Prague.

Chapter 18
Separations

The next morning, when Stan and Mindy joined her brothers and the others for breakfast at their hotel's restaurant, Anselm quietly mentioned that "our guest," meaning Senator M, had been passed along for transport to a "distant country" to be put on trial for murder and treason. Anselm said point blank to Stan and Mindy, "I'll give you no other information, nor will I discuss it further with you."

The following week in Cesky Krumlov, where they and their party had rented a house on the outskirts of the village, was tense but not unbearably so, and Stan and Mindy enjoyed walking through the town, biking through the countryside, and talking with locals—those they met who spoke some English. Bennett had taught them a few Czech phrases to help them get around. In this medieval village, much more than in Prague, they found that the shadow of communism darkened the memories of the people, especially the older residents they met. Stan went through the days calm on the surface, but a deeper anxiety made it hard for him to sleep. Mindy was relatively unperturbed and so whenever Stan flicked on the light to read at around 3:30 a.m., Mindy, not quite awake, simply rolled over to protect her eyes.

When the Sterne party arrived back in the United States, Stan waited a few days until he had recovered from jet lag, and then made an appointment to talk with Dr. Sterne. Sterne was not available for more than a week, but he agreed to meet at Stan's cottage as soon as he could. On a Sunday evening when Sterne finally came, he insisted on talking in Stan's car without Mindy. They sat in the roomy back seat of the old Chevy.

Though much time had passed since their return, Sterne was visibly unhappy. Frowning, he said that he had been informed by his sons and Bennett that Stan had learned about their operation in Europe, that he had threatened to expose the Assembly. But Stan did not apologize and demanded

explanations of the purpose of the whole episode. Sterne would not say much at first, except to repeat what Stan already knew, nor did Sterne mention Mindy's knowledge about the true nature of the Chinook Assembly.

"Dr. Sterne, you know Mindy is aware of your clandestine work. Why have you excluded her from this conversation?"

With sadness in his voice and comportment, Sterne said, "I now regret not forbidding you and Mindy to go to the Czech Republic. Also, it seems I should have brought you in further so you could have known about our operation."

"I agree—that you should have told me more."

"Your presence on the street the night of M's arrest jeopardized the mission. Had you been any closer, we would have been forced to cancel."

"We could have been killed."

"You were never in danger. Once you moved within a certain range, we were monitoring you. In retrospect, Bennett should have advised—rather, ordered—you to stay in your hotel room. Caffeine nearly undid the project, but what's more important, my daughter has now been made vulnerable."

"Mindy already knew about the Assembly, Dr. Sterne."

"I didn't want her involved."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to protect her."

"From what?"

"From herself. I told you that she can't handle this kind of stress and the necessary deception." Sterne's voice now dropped in volume and pitch, which said to Stan that he was angry. "You should have prevented her from looking more closely in Prague!"

"How? By restraining her physically?"

Sterne did not answer, but after a short while repeated, "I don't want her involved."

"I know. With due respect, Dr. Sterne, it's an illusion to think she can be kept out. I'm determined to speak my mind. We're husband and wife. It's my prerogative as head of my family to include her or not include her in my work to the extent I deem is right. I need to have this burden lifted from me—this burden of having secrets from my wife."

"You are correct to some extent, Stanley. But, until you pressed your point at the hotel, she only had guesses. You're right, it's your place now to be her protective umbrella. I've known this, but as a father, it's hard to let go. If you lived farther away . . . We in the Assembly should begin to view you as a team, with her limitations factoring into your assignments.

"And her strengths," Stan said.

"And her strengths," Sterne repeated. "Patience, fortitude, kindness. Yet they don't eliminate her basic nature. She'll want to become active, and I fear her taking matters too far someday."

"She and I are concerned that the Assembly has gone too far."

"Perhaps you're right," Sterne said. "I mean, you should be given more information so you don't reach wrong conclusions. You really have a limited idea about how far we've gone."

Sterne rolled the window down. The damp, chill air pouring inside was fragrant with the incense of evergreen trees and moldering fall leaves. His anger seemed to fly out of the window and fade away.

"I understand your concerns about Senator M," Sterne said, "but you must realize how dangerous the Senator—*former* Senator M—was to our country. Among other things, he was an outspoken activist for direct euthanasia. Politically, he was a fascist. But worse, he was responsible for murdering sixteen of his political opponents in government and in business, some of whom had been his associates who wanted to expose him. The late Governor Farrell of Oregon was one of his victims. If M became president—he was favored to win in the upcoming election, according to the polls—there's no doubt he would have become more a despot than he was already. It was clear that the judicial system and his peers in the Senate were either powerless to stop him or afraid. I'm assuming a risk in telling you this, but M's capture has made us significant friends that we could not have won otherwise. We've not decided yet, but we're discussing whether we should reveal to the press and, by them, to the world that M hasn't been killed, but only arrested. It was necessary to portray the fiction of his death, at least temporarily, to safely remove him from the Czech Republic. No one searches for a person whose body has been cremated."

"What about the trauma you've put his family members through?" Stan asked.

Dr. Sterne remained silent for a long time, until Stan began to think he was stubbornly refusing to answer. Stan was about to repeat his question when Sterne held up his hand.

"In a just society, M would never have been elected, he never would have been given power over lives, or he might not have become an evil man. Maybe he would have been decent, or maybe he would have only expressed his ambitions and perversions in small ways. But the truth is, his family—his former wife and his children—have already suffered unimaginably. How do you think we were able to apprehend him? This project has been in the works for years."

"Are you saying that people close to him were involved?"

"It serves no purpose to be cagey with you. The answer is 'Yes.' This is among our most effective tools, and it's a human one—a personal one. We work as a family more than as an organization—as a community that looks out for the interests of its members."

"Sounds like *The Godfather*."

Sterne sniffed in ridicule. "The movie? I never saw it, but yes, I suppose there's a similarity, except we're stopping murder. Let me tell you how we're organized. Our operations are run within discrete units called 'peds,' a term taken from soil science. A ped is a naturally forming structure that develops in undisturbed soil. Many of our peds form when one person, or a small group of persons, decides to resist the GiP. They take their cues about how to act from the media, but more often from their own logical conclusions. Peds know intuitively that they must not communicate with one another or else they run the chance of discovery by the GiP. It's better that they don't even know of the others' existence. There could be a number of peds working in any city, completely unknown to each other. Why this all has worked so far is that peds exist at every level of society and deep into the GiP itself. The role of the upper layer of the Assembly is to bring certain peds into coordination with others, peds that are strong, well placed, and secure from GiP corruption, meaning infiltration. Our main security is that the GiP doesn't believe we exist, or that it's even possible that we exist."

Concerned about what seemed to be Assembly heavy-handedness, Stan had listened to Sterne, but did not attribute value to his explanation and he leaped at a sudden idea. "What about the onslaught against abortionists in the past year that the government is using to crack down on everyone? You're not involved in any of those attacks, are you? Are they only kidnappings—I'm sorry, I mean arrests and faked shootings?" Stan was not being sarcastic.

Sterne inspected Stan's face closely, and Stan returned the look without blinking, but also without aggression.

"This is what I want to speak with you about, Stan."

"The killing of abortionists?"

"Yes."

"Have you been involved in this?"

Sterne sighed.

Stan rephrased his question. "You have arrested a number of them, right?"

"Yes, some. A few. We'd like to apprehend more, but it's becoming difficult, because they're hiding themselves better now, though it doesn't seem to slow their assassins any."

Stan nodded for Sterne to continue.

"When I first invited you to become a member of the United States Underground, I told you there would come a day when, as the GiP weakened, it would become more oppressive. In reaction, citizens would no longer tolerate the increasing oppression, and at a certain point, we might move to seize control before anarchy sets in. Well, our model is sound, but there's a factor that we have not completely anticipated, and that's an armed faction of rebels—or patriots, as they might seem to us—who would mount an insurgent shooting conflict against the GiP. It was never our intention to provoke a violent civil war against the GiP. Rather, we contemplated a sudden *coup d'etat*, carefully calculated, hopefully bloodless, thereby pulling support to us from leaders of the U.S. Congress and the armed services."

Sterne paused to massage tension from his neck.

"The problem is this," he continued. "These assassinations are stirring the hornet's nest. They're not directed at the GiP—and I'm not calling the assassin an insurgent, but he's having the

same negative effect. Rather than dying a quiet, slow death, the GiP is provoked and invigorated. It's like a bullfight when the bull is down and dying, but if a *torero* yanks his tail, he stands up again. We've been gaining control behind the scenes. We've been using the system and waiting, but this person or persons . . . and I believe that these killings of abortion workers—how many of them have there been now? Thirty-nine or forty?—most of the killings are the act of one person. This person may generate others who emulate his style. In the future, he may join with others in a blood pact. Militia groups could find the chance they wished for to use their guns—guns greased and buried in the woods. Then this all gets muddled. And apart from the moral dimensions, we believe this approach will not work; the GiP still holds the reigns of power. One slip and we can be uncovered, or if war is engaged now, thousands of people will be hurt . . ."

"So, why are you telling me this? What do you want me to do?" Stan felt foolish asking these questions.

"What?" Sterne had not heard, because he was so focused in formulating his words and imagining the future.

"What can I do?"

Sterne paused again before he answered. "You've come to the point of our meeting. We believe that the primary abortionist sniper is your acquaintance, Thomas Sherman, otherwise known as Tommy Duckwitz."

Stan denied it for an instant, and then after reflecting in the next moment, he believed it possible. He remembered how Tommy had attacked Talus Schenk in Schenk's fraternity room. He could not think of a single factor about Tommy to contradict Sterne, except that Stan was astonished that the character of Tommy could have grown so large. The incongruity, or contrast, between what he knew of Tommy, the charming, talented and dynamic, rather volatile, high school student, and of what he might have become was only of scale, and the scale quickly shrank to insignificance.

"How . . . How do you know that Tommy is the sniper?"

"I don't know for certain, of course. If you recall, shortly after his girlfriend—Mindy's friend, Elisabeth Telford—died from a botched abortion, Dr. Mark Ponder disappeared into Canada. We were responsible for the disappearance, and in fact, he did

not disappear at all, but only appeared to disappear. Ponder was arrested and put on trial. Suffice it to say, our timing of his arrest was critical, because we suspected that Thomas Sherman planned to kill Ponder. In our surveillance of Ponder, we found Sherman also surveying him, we were the huntsman watching wolves stalk an elk, while both elk and wolves are oblivious to the hunter."

"Why didn't you take action about Tommy then?"

"We weren't sure it was necessary and when we realized how disruptive he was, he had already vanished. It's likely he killed Talus Schenk."

"You're kidding!"

"I once thought it was the girl's father, but we learned for certain he didn't do it." Sterne stopped to collect his thoughts, then went on. "I hate to admit this, but Thomas Sherman dropped from our screen. Only when our analysts created a profile did his name arise again. We've been looking for him ever since, without success. He changes pace and methods. His method is change, and then with his next attack, he repeats himself, which itself is a change. He changes targets, and no doubt with his theater background, he alters his shape, colors, and patterns, and . . . fits into tight spaces, to trap and annihilate his prey, which is why we have nicknamed him the Octopus. The name escaped from our circle somehow and is used by the press now."

"I've heard of Octopus. Oh, he would like that name."

"Would he?"

"It's weird enough."

"This is why we need you to come onto this project, Stan. You know him. Our best operators have failed to find him. You would, too, except he knows you. We want you to persuade him by friendship to allow us to take him into custody. Or, if this won't work, then you'll be the bait for us to capture him. We must stop him from killing. No doubt, some of his victims deserve it, but he's indiscriminate, and relatively innocent people have been hurt. He's denying the guilty due process and humane punishment. His approach opposes our principles, but the large effect is he's provoking the beast."

"How? How exactly will I find him?"

"You won't. No one can. You must place yourself where he will find *you*, and that means being near the places of abortion. If you are in the right location when he does his advance work, he may see you, and talk. You might recognize him. We have very bright people developing an itinerary for you, based on predictive models, so it won't be only a matter of chance. I'll give more details later."

"So, you want me to travel?"

"That's it, basically."

Stan quickly felt distaste for the idea. Stan did not doubt that Tommy was doing wrong, terrible wrong, by becoming a cold-hearted killer, if what Sterne said was true—but on the other hand, he could relate to Tommy's alleged actions, and Stan was not the only one. The news media reported how the Octopus had become a folk hero; a stylized Octopus image had begun appearing around the country as graffiti, though few people publically or even privately admitted their admiration. Sterne had so far only related to Tommy as a problem. Stan's concern was for Tommy as a person, and in that frame of mind, he asked Sterne, with a bit of irony, "If you want Tommy stopped, why don't you leak your suspicions to the GiP? They—"

Stan had never seen Dr. Sterne fully angry before, and could not have imagined what it might be like. Stan was surprised and frightened at what he saw. Sterne did not explode and shout, or turn red, but in fact, he did the opposite: he grew pale, calm, and still. In anger, Sterne became more of what he was below the surface. It was an anger not spent in emotion or in words, but in decisive action. Sterne's anger sucked contradiction from the atmosphere, so much that Stan felt all his self-confidence draining away.

Sterne spoke softly. "Do you know what the GiP would do with your friend Tommy?"

"What?"

"Sherman would not be captured. He'd never receive a trial. They'd shoot him, grind up his flesh and bones, and feed it to their dogs . . . I'm not just saying this for effect; they have done this exact thing before."

Stan paused a long while, thinking, working up the courage to ask, "What about the GiP saving face by producing the assassin and putting him on display?"

"The climate is changing. First, they might not get a guilty verdict; Octopus has sympathizers. Second, the GiP is losing concern about its reputation, and that's disquieting."

+ + +

Stan now moved toward another realm in his work with the Assembly, one matching latent talents. He felt comforted that his wife could now share the challenges, even if only by talking about them. Mindy told him that for years she had been disappointed because her father involved her brothers, and yet never even told her about the Assembly. She was grieved that he trusted her so little, but she had accepted it long before, and emotionally the exclusion made no difference now that it had come into the open.

"It's a small pain I rarely notice," she said. "I'm compensated because Dad has always seemed devoted to me more than to the other children. Maybe because I was his first. His little girl."

In a matter of weeks, Stan left his comparatively plush office in the central building of the complex and moved into an airy attic corner of an older building, the Ebenezer—two, three, and four stories of wood and rock with high ceilings. One large lower part of the building extended out to the south. A circular drive accessed the front entrance at the southeast corner. There was a room of bowling alleys under a mountain of old furniture toward the back of the house, and the center, main room looked like a cathedral, the ceiling reaching to the roof more than sixty feet above the floor. The Ebenezer had served in succession as a residence, then an indoor recreation building, then servants' quarters, and lastly a storage barn, and the whole had fallen into disrepair, but recently the conference center had been fixing the plumbing and electrical systems.

Stan's new office looked over the fields to the north, now lined with yellow and red clad trees of late fall. Being on the fourth floor of a later addition to the Ebenezer, his office had sloped ceilings whose central beam came off a chord of a truss in the main room. The wall between the upper space of the main room

and Stan's room was sealed off by boards and heavy paper hiding stained glass windows.

Hardly anyone but Sterne knew of those windows. He said to Stan, "A long while ago, we scheduled the windows for sale, because, with this addition, they weren't visible anymore from the inside, or the outside, either. We never got around to removing them—maybe we'll be glad when we restore the building—we can backlight them artificially. You can uncover the windows, if you like. I imagine they would be nice with light coming from inside the big room."

This office area, though adequate, was more the garret and paneled with rough oak and warmed by a portable electric heater, unless Stan wanted to tend a fire in the woodstove on the eastern wall. File cabinets ornamented the western wall. His desk faced the windows. He brought up a chair and a floor lamp from the storage below. One of the grounds workers and a housekeeper helped him arrange and clean the room to his satisfaction, and late in the afternoon on the day Stan took occupancy, Sterne climbed the stairs and came in.

"How do you like your new appointments?" Sterne asked.

"Homey, and lonesome, I think. This is an amazing edifice."

"It is. You're the only person in the building. Your work is of such a nature we could no longer keep you in the central office, and because it's not a high-level operation, neither could we place you in secure quarters. This, then, is our rustic middle ground."

"Suits me fine."

"Besides, you'll not be here much. The word I'm giving out is you are inventorying the antique material and the books in the building for sale and auction. Your official travel will involve transporting furniture items and selling the books."

"I don't know anything about antiques and old books!"

"You'll learn enough. The important appraisal work has been done, and you'll find the documents in your file cabinets. The pieces are photographed and labeled. Many of the items are worth only their function, but there are a number of valuable collector pieces. Those have been sold already, and your job is to deliver them and dispose of the secondary material at antique stores. The books in the library will be easy to sell, and you

should return good money for some of them. Being a teacher of literature will help you. In your search for Thomas Sherman, you'll be driving a Chinook Assembly van and pulling a cargo trailer. For the East Coast, we will rent a truck one way and fly you back. There'll be a real explanation for every place you go. These days, being suspected of not having a legitimate travel purpose may get you detained for hours. There aren't checkpoints on the highways, not yet, but we must take precautions in case you're stopped. Your remote location here allows you to be absent without it being noticeable."

"Where will I go?"

"Read this file." Sterne set a packet before Stan. "If you have questions, contact me. This is something we can discuss on the phone, initially. Keep it general."

Stan picked up the material.

"But before you leave," Sterne said, "there's something you must do—visit Sherman's mother. We'll make one move before the next, and we need to learn what she knows in case Sherman has contacted her. The story is, you're looking for your friend, who seems to be missing: that's all. We have already investigated the property of Sherman's grandparents and interviewed the neighbors, and found no clues whatsoever."

† † †

One evening, Stan and Mindy left Maxwell with Grandma Timmons so Mindy could see his new upstairs office in the Ebenezer, and afterwards she asked him, "Have you seen the whole house?"

"Only a perfunctory tour."

"Let me show you. I brought a flashlight." And so, for an hour, they climbed and descended steps, walked passageways, and discovered hidden rooms. There seemed to be no end to the surprises. At the indoor swimming pool with arched windows built into the walls, Stan looked down to the dry tiles and said, "I'd like to fix this so we can go skinny dipping." Mindy punched him in the ribs and he squirmed away.

Back in the cathedral room with its massive stone fireplace, they sat on a leather covered couch. "Wouldn't you love to live

here and fill the place with warmth and noise and children?" Mindy asked.

"With you beside me now, we've already begun. Except for noise." Stan began to tickle her mercilessly and she to howl.

On another evening soon afterwards, Stan visited Tommy's mother, Perdita Babcock, at her upscale apartment on the ridge of the West Hills. The meeting was short.

Stan sat on the edge of the textured-cloth divan while she and her current husband, Ray, lounged back in separate hard chairs, smoking cigarettes. Emanating aloofness, Mrs. Babcock had "no idea in the world" where he might be; but after Ray had silently walked Stan to the basement parking garage, he reached out to shake Stan's hand and asked in an anxious, confidential manner, "Do you think we should report Tommy as missing?"

Stan felt sudden panic—he did not want Tommy's name to come before the authorities. To respond, he said, "No, sir, I don't think so. Not yet. I think he will turn up." Stan hoped his answer sounded smooth.

The man seemed relieved and genuinely concerned for his wife's son. "Thank you for coming," he said. "His mother does love him, it's just she's been through hell. If you learn anything, please let us know."

Stan thanked him in return and drove away empty-handed.

The next morning, as per Sterne's instructions, Stan packed enough personal belongings for two weeks, and with a grounds crew helper, loaded the Chinook Assembly van and the trailer with antiques, furniture, and heavy boxes. Sterne came over in the evening for supper. After the meal, they strolled to the back of Stan's property on a trail to where a creek flowed through the thick underbrush.

"This isn't complicated," Sterne introduced, as if the travel project was all he had been thinking about. "We've used the best search techniques, and they have failed. Large-scale netting methods are available for GiP law enforcement, but not to us—we can't dragnet a neighborhood. Even if we get close to Sherman, it's obvious we can't disarm him and wrestle him to the ground without excruciatingly impossible planning and

implementation. We might be able to track and arrest him in a remote location, but we have to find him first. We're not even sure we can identify him. Sherman's methods put him outside our available action, with one exception: the personal touch. We have you.

"We've based the broad picture on the first series of killings because when copycats began in earnest, it clouded the picture. Geographically, Sherman acts randomly. For all we know, he selects a city by pitching a dart at a map. The targets he selects provide the best opportunity for killing and escaping. Of course, the abortionists are vulnerable as they commute, or move around in any way, and while they are in their homes. Even though they are hiding better, the abortion sites are their weak links, because they are advertised and known, and an assassin will begin stalking there, though the strike may take place elsewhere.

"We studied the security of every abortion place in the country and have narrowed the potential targets to several dozen. That number is diminishing as they react to the assassinations. We have surveillance crews assigned to half of these and we are developing the other half.

"I can't adequately convey how dangerous this project is, because our workers themselves become potential subjects of surveillance from GiP police. The only protection our people have is the fact that they're locals who have realistic motives for being near the abortion sites. When I think about how risky this is, I nearly faint, but I must remember what part this plays in our purpose. As with anything, success depends upon maintaining impartiality about accomplishing this one limited objective. If the danger becomes too great at any point, we . . . abort and walk away. I'll consider the operation a success if the Assembly remains invisible to the GiP, regardless of whether or not we apprehend Sherman. Even if he's at large, it's not hopeless. There's always the chance the GiP will capture him. Bad for him, but maybe good for us."

Sterne grimaced and massaged his neck. "And that scenario, too, is fraught with danger. If he is executed and the story leaks out, the GiP will have unwittingly made a martyr of him and ignite further violence." Sterne paused and breathed deeply, the air whispering in his nose, and he looked closely at Stan, who

was absorbing all of this. "You're thinking of what you'll be doing for us."

Stan nodded.

"You'll help us penetrate his disguise. As I have said, we are placing you near the abortion places as a lure. We hope he will recognize *you* and at least reveal himself, but ideally, surrender. If he won't leave with you, we'll follow him. You will be delivering furniture and spending every available moment near the sites where they slay children."

"What should I say to him?"

Sterne had no ready answer. "Just . . . just ask him to leave with you. Tell him . . . tell him that you want to help him. Bring him home in the van. We will take care of the rest."

"How?"

"You'll have to trust me. It might be rough."

Sterne stopped talking. It had grown dark. The sky misted about them and the odor of skunk cabbage permeated the air. Stan looked back to his cottage, all cozy at the top of the rise of ground, the windows glowing. He did not want to leave his family for any length of time for any reason, but this was not what was in his mind. What he thought, he did not wish to say. Sterne waited patiently, as if he knew what Stan was thinking. Tension grew as the muteness lengthened. Stan had spent all day preparing and he was supposed to leave long before daylight after a few hours of sleep, but the uselessness of it rankled and filled him with resentment.

At last Sterne said, "Speak. Speak your thought. You must say it."

Stan fixed his eyes on Sterne, his reticence broken finally by rising anger. "This is insane! It's an impossible waste of time! We'll never find him this way!"

"Okay." Sterne began walking back to the cottage and said, "Well, we will close the project and you can resume your travel arrangement work. Your office work."

"Wait a second." Stan jogged up with him. "How important is it to stop Tommy?"

"For you? Isn't he your friend? But I might be wrong."

Stan knew he must go on this tour, but the obligation did not prevent him from feeling the futility. Having expressed himself

fervently, his mood now was calm and resigned. He said quietly, "How many abortion clinics did you say I have to go to?"

"Stan, in our work we literally spend equivalent lifetimes waiting, watching, accumulating notes, with no discernible results. Men and women sacrifice countless, sleepless hours observing people walk by. Staring at doors opening and closing. Listening to passionate human voices too far away and fragmented to be understandable, and hearing the incessant groans, whines, and murmuring of automobile engines all day into the harsh hours of the night. If you can imagine this to the slightest extent, you will have a clue about our organization. Taking action is the smallest part. Meanwhile, we wait and, well . . . we read."

Stan glanced up in puzzlement.

"And so I have something for you." Sterne silently led Stan to his black Mercedes and opened the trunk. Stan peered inside at three cardboard boxes.

"What are these?"

Sterne opened one of the larger boxes. "Books. About one hundred titles of the world's best literature and history. Diamonds in ink and paper. Some are audio recordings. All are new, and I expect a few you have not read before? Pick those you wish to take. And in case you want others, I have a gift card with four hundred dollars credit on it for you."

Stan had long ago spent the funds Mindy had given him for books. With gratitude, he took the new card and put it in his shirt pocket. He sorted through the boxes and took one to the van. He returned, hoisted another box, and started for the cottage. Sterne asked, "Where are you going?"

"I want Mindy to look through these. She'll be waiting, too. We'll buy some children's books with the gift card."

After their toddler was asleep, Mindy and Stan propped up on pillows and talked in bed with the bedside lamp turned low. The window of their room was open. Coyotes sang from a pasture under a cloud-enveloped sky, the waning gibbous moon just rising from behind the clouds, and then it was quiet.

"Are you glad you married me?" Mindy asked.

"Of course. I can't imagine any other life."

"You can't?"

"No."

"Wouldn't you rather have a normal life without secrecy and danger?" Mindy said wistfully. "Wouldn't you rather just teach school and grow old with your children around you?"

"I'd rather, but what we are doing is normal for this present day. It would be abnormal to pretend that things aren't falling apart around us. It would be abnormal to hide, or live in some isolated desert, not when we can do something about what's going on. When I say normal, I mean what we are meant to be as human beings. Not controlled by fear, selfishness, greed, cowardice, and . . . and hatred or pride or lust. Aren't those the seven deadly sins?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

Stan came back to the relevant topic. "Anyway, those aspects of humanity are common, but they are not natural. Something's broken when they rule over us."

"True . . . Are you afraid?"

"Not yet. I mean, I'm nervous, but I've not felt afraid, not yet. I suppose that will come. I avoid thinking about the worst."

"What would be the worst?"

"You sure you want to talk about that?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Talking will help. I already think about the worst that could happen, and I am afraid, though I'm not facing danger like you are."

"Okay. The worst. An automobile accident. I could be robbed and killed at random, and then I'd miss seeing Maxy and the baby grow up. Max could choke and die, or something could happen to you when I'm away. What I fear most is not ever seeing you again. I think about that when you drive somewhere—to Portland or to the grocery store."

"Are you afraid of being arrested by the GiP when you're prowling around the abortion clinics? They might take you for an accomplice."

"Not really . . . Because . . . I can't imagine that. I . . . I don't think they'd guess what I'm really up to."

"Maybe. But hanging out might be enough for them to keep you in jail. How can you hold out there without exposing the Assembly? You're going to look really suspicious."

"I know, it might be bad. I'll just be there playing stupid. It's hard to tell whether a person has the right anymore to be an aimless bumbler, because sitting around and reading books might be dangerous to society, when it's in the wrong place." Stan then asked, "What frightens you, Mindy?"

"I'm only afraid of . . ." She did not continue right away, and Stan knew that her vocal chords had failed her. In a few moments she recovered enough to speak, but Stan heard the tears still in her voice.

"I'm only afraid of being alone."

"But you have Max, and your family all around."

"Will I always?"

Stan did not have an answer.

After a few hours of sleep, while it was dark and rainy they quietly left through the cottage's front door; at the edge of the driveway Stan embraced and kissed Mindy, who was wearing her housecoat and standing under an umbrella. To Stan's hands she was warm through the soft fabric.

He drove away and she watched until the lights of the van and trailer vanished around a turn in the road. She listened to the sound of the motor rumbling until it merged with the morning noise of the highway some distance away. Then she slowly walked back to the cottage, turned on a light in the front room, picked up one of the new books, settled into an easy chair, and pulled a sleeping bag around her.

It would be hours until breakfast.

† † †

Stan's endless hours of driving from city to city and hanging out were unspeakably tedious. The deliveries were uneventful. He called every night from motel rooms and talked with Mindy, and it was like before they were married. They shared details, no matter how mundane, and all of Stan's were mundane and unimportant. Mostly, he had walked through neighborhoods around the abortion places for hours; he sat in the van, in restaurants, and on park benches for hours, and read for hours and hours. Other than cashiers, clerks, waitresses, and Mindy, he did not talk with anyone. While most people near the abortion places averted their eyes and moved away from him,

other people watched him closely, or tried to strike up a conversation, and Stan suspected them to be GiP/FBI detectives or agents. He did not know, and it was spooky. In spite of the pressure, Stan became incalculably bored, but at last the books and all the furniture were gone. Stan lingered extra days at one abortion place to give a finishing chance for Tommy to emerge, and one night Mindy said to him, "I really look forward to you being home, Stan." Those words were code from her father that the mission was over. Stan had not seen Tommy, had not likely been seen by him, and he had accomplished nothing important.

He returned, heard about his next tour, and promptly told Sterne, "I will not do this by myself. Send an agreeable companion with me, or else Mindy and Max will come along. There's room in the van. I don't want to be away from Mindy anymore while she is pregnant."

Sterne resisted, but Stan held firm, and in the end, Mindy convinced her husband to compromise. She proposed, "I'll go every other trip, interspersed by one solo and one with someone within the Assembly. We'll all stay home as my due date approaches and until the baby is born."

Stan agreed and Sterne approved.

† † †

Toward the end of January, on a brown, stark afternoon, Mindy's waters broke over the floor of the cottage kitchen. Stan called the midwife and Mindy called a close girlfriend who worked at the Chinook Assembly office. Mindy's mother took Maxy to see the horses and up to the Bluff House to read stories until his bedtime. When the midwife arrived breathless at the cottage an hour later, Mindy was well dilated and poised to begin pushing. Stan knelt by the bed, as he had done at the birth of his nephew and his son. The baby exited smoothly into the midwife's hands and stared around in wonder at the outside world. A girl. Chrysanthe was the name the child's parents had accepted to honor Stan's mother, who loved the flower of similar name.

When she held the baby to nurse, Mindy whispered that she wanted the middle name of Yathom for the baby, but Stan whispered back that he did not like the sound, and when he asked why she wanted this, she sighed, "Never mind."

"It sounds Hebrew," he said. "I think her middle name is . . . Rahel, which is a form of Rachel. Wasn't your great-grandmother's name Rahel?"

"Yes, 'Rahel weeping' in Jeremiah. It's the same."

"What do you mean?" Stan was perplexed.

"It's not anything. I'm very happy now."

Stan simply put this confusion out of mind.

† † †

During the next five months, Stan continued his travels, driving interstates around the country. With Mindy and the children along on every other trip, they visited many of the nation's national parks. The Ebenezer bowling alley emptied of furniture, and Tommy had not shown himself to Stan. According to the authorities and the underground press—the mainstream press ceased reporting such incidents for fear of inciting imitation—the Octopus had killed seventeen more people, including six who were butchered at once by automatic gunfire outside an abortion site. The GiP boiled with anger and frustration. Sterne worried that Stan and Mindy's presence near the abortion sites may have left a trail to the Assembly. Twice, the killings took place after Stan had left a particular location. It could be lethal to the Assembly if a GiP investigator believed Stan was collecting tactical information for the killer.

The agent assigned to travel with Stan every fourth trip trained him to appear innocuous and nonchalant. "Watch your feet. Keep your nose in a book. Look straight ahead, and never look over your shoulder! When you must cast your eyes around, scratch your ear. Gape and stretch. Live in the moment until your inoffensive movements become habitual." Stan's periodic partners knew their jobs well, and he jokingly suspected that some of his companions were CIA operatives on vacation.

In early May, after Stan had been on a useless expedition in New England with Bernard, Stan returned home for a week's rest and to celebrate his son's second birthday. On the following Friday evening, Doctor and Mrs. Sterne dropped by the cottage after supper. To Stan's surprise, Sterne opened up a discussion about their excursions while they relaxed in the front room—always before it had been outside or away from the cottage. The

baby rolled around on the floor and played with Max and a set of colorful plastic building blocks.

"We'll have to call the travel off, Stan." He massaged his face with his fingers and moaned almost imperceptibly. "We won't find Sherman. The chances were remote in the first place. We've collected a large amount of data, but the most significant accomplishment is that we maintained a presence around sensitive facilities without being detected."

Stan moved across the room and unplugged the telephone. He would be relieved to stop the aimless wanderings, but he did not understand why Sterne wanted to quit. "Why, what's happened? Is anything wrong?"

Sterne ran his fingers through his hair and plucked at his beard. Stan had never seen him this unsettled. "Well, if this were chess I'd say the GiP has us in perpetual check, without knowing they are playing a game. And I fear they are about to bump the board onto the floor."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not the only one who's been fruitless. We're stymied in most of our operational areas. The people and networks are in place, the peds are knocking on doors and maintaining tension, but while we're able to observe what's happening, we're accomplishing little. The GiP is shutting us down. It's too stable, and who knows, but it might last another hundred years. We can't keep vigilant forever. I'll give you one example—there are many, but this one's in your field.

"In response to the continual attacks, the abortion clinics are becoming fortresses. The private ones that remain functioning will, in the next months, be protected by the military, and the government is opening killing sites on military bases.

"A person will have to undergo an extensive security check to get anywhere close, even the victim-mothers. The GiP is offsetting the additional trouble for "customers" by killing babies for free or at a discount—giving them vouchers. Abortion personnel will be given armed escorts and guards at their residences. Our anti-abortion operation will be dead within two months."

"Because of Tommy?"

"And of others like him."

"What will *they* do in response . . . to the situation? Quit?"

Sterne paused in thought, his hands holding the sides of his face. He stood up, walked to the fireplace, then he immediately sat again on the couch. "Those not caught have, without exception, operated singly—as lone wolves. I think . . . I believe they'll seek each other out, but they won't be able to work together, and collaboration will make them vulnerable. More likely, they'll recruit from their acquaintances—and continue fighting, taking more risks, hitting bigger and harder targets, with more violence. The stronger the GiP makes itself, the stronger the dissident resistance will become."

"And *you're* thinking of taking higher risks?"

Sterne sighed in anguish. "Exactly."

Miriam Sterne had never been present at these discussions—another precedent broken tonight. Now she sat up and unconsciously clicked her tongue, signaling that she wished to speak. "Mr. Sterne doesn't want to tell you, but I shall. Tomorrow, we open the most aggressive gambit ever—if I may talk chess, too. We have in motion an incredible plan—before it's beyond our reach. At seven different abortion sites around the country and in Canada, we've filled the appointment books with our people. Once inside, within an hour of each other, they'll immobilize the abortion workers—nurses, the MD's, the receptionists, the security guard, everyone. It'll be forceful and instantaneous, but the aim is to not hurt anyone, if it's possible. We are making use of drugs and restraints, not firearms. Our people, including the women, are expert in hand-to-hand combat. Subduing each encounter should be easy. Once the abortion personnel are under control, they'll be—this sounds clinical, but—they'll be wrapped and carried to a waiting truck. In the meantime, demolitionists will rig the building, and once the transport trucks and our vehicles are clear, and no one is nearby—again, this is coordinated as to time—they'll demolish and burn every one of the death camps. And then we disappear—our soldiers to return home, and the killers to prison and trial—and we cancel this section of operations for the foreseeable future. Then, for a time, we'll hibernate in almost every other section."

Dr. Sterne picked up with, "This is an act of desperation, due to rapidly changing conditions. After this, further activity against the abortion sites would involve certainty of discovery until we adapt our miniature drone/robotic technology. With that, we'll be able to undertake precise military attacks without detection, but we are months from putting such technology into practice. At present, we . . ." Sterne's voice trailed away.

Stan and Mindy looked horrified, not only at the concept of invading an abortion place, arresting the killers, and destroying the facility, but at the size and scope of the idea. It was unattainable, and it was suicide. Stan began to stammer one of a hundred objections.

Mrs. Sterne stopped him with a chilling look and said, "Stan, you have to believe me when I tell you they have thought of absolutely everything. They're prepared. And it will happen tomorrow." Mrs. Sterne rose from her chair and took Mindy's hand. She had spoken coldly up until now, but tears came to her eyes when she said, "And, Mindy—my precious daughter and the mother of my only grandchildren, so far—my dear firstborn, two of your brothers and your twin sisters are on combat teams."

Stan stood up and held out his arms. "Why, why are you doing this? It's crazy."

Mrs. Sterne turned to him. "Do you really not know, Stan? Have you been with us for so long, and you don't know?"

"I . . . I'm not sure. Is it worth it? Some of us might die."

"To save lives, Stan. The reason is to save lives of innocent children, while we can."

"But won't burning the buildings tweak the nose of the GiP?" Stan asked. "Wouldn't it be better to only destroy the abortion equipment so as to not spectacularly injure their pride?"

"We thoroughly explored that route," Dr. Sterne said. "If we left the buildings intact, the GiP would make them functional again. It'll come out publicly anyway, one way or the other."

"Won't they open new facilities and re-staff them?"

"Maybe not," Dr. Sterne said. "They might have other matters to think about soon."

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In the morning, after a fitful sleep for most of the adults, all the family members who were not involved in the operation gathered for a breakfast prepared by Mrs. Hagensen at the Bluff House. Bennett was absent, but Sarah was there. Each person busy with his own thoughts, no one felt like talking, except for the younger children, whose play seemed louder than usual. After the meal, everyone helped clear up dishes, and when Mrs. Hagensen left, they collected in the front room, the one that had the huge window looking west.

Stan's dad read a *Smithsonian* magazine. Sterne rustled through a stack of newspapers and looked at the Internet. Two children played chess, and the others huddled around a jigsaw puzzle. Harp music played on the sound system in the background. Stan had lit a fire in the fireplace, the morning having been cool. Stan and Mindy sat close together on the couch whispering and staring at the flames. At 11:30 a.m., the phone jangled, and every head looked up, but no one jumped to answer. Sterne nodded to Stan to take the call.

Stan picked up the handset, listened, and only said, "Uh huh, uh huh." And then, "We're not interested, thank you." He hung up and said, "That was the strangest salesman. He wanted to know when you last painted your house."

"Thank God!" Dr. Sterne exclaimed, and then he laughed. "*Ha, ha, ha*."

Mrs. Sterne sobbed suddenly and then laughed, too.

But the laughter ceased abruptly and gravity settled back into place. Sterne explained, his voice tremulous, "It means that all are safe, so far. It's miraculous. Let's see what's on the news."

The adults filed into the television room and sat in chairs, on the floor, or else they stood. Coverage of the bombings filled nearly every channel, and all present in the room looked on with wonder and fear.

Sterne sat forward on his seat and sketched notes now and then, and as the information began to be repeated, he sat back and began a commentary to the rest of the family. "The story's so huge that the GiP can't suppress it. Then again, it's likely they're allowing it to come out so they can manipulate it for their own purposes. But notice how confused the reporters are. They've not pieced together the whole picture, and see how

much is wildly inaccurate. I think the GiP is sowing deliberate deception. But they'll not know yet that the buildings were emptied of people, even though we planted numerous messages hoping to save firefighters from entering the burning buildings. They couldn't get in anyway, because the buildings were flattened. See, the fires are still raging. The message you received, Stan, meant our people are safe, but each of the abortionists as well, and also that when the bombs ignited, the properties were completely clear. These bombs imploded the buildings, and so there wouldn't have been flying debris."

Sterne paused for a moment to listen. "*Good!* Did you hear? The press is questioning the GiP claims of injuries and deaths. 'No signs,' is what the reporter said. No signs yet of injuries. The truth will come out, eventually. We have friends in the media, too. Not many, but some, and more than before."

The rim and crater of Mt. St. Helens from the NE, 1986.

It is a city like Prague, on the outskirts near a train depot. I am sitting on a bench that is part of a terminal—gray, without exterior walls, the roof propped by concrete pillars. The wind begins to blow, and clouds churn darkly overhead. Sirens wail, and people nearby scurry away. The sky blackens and roars all around. The force of the wind pushes a car along the pavement. Rain pummels me, and I huddle in a protected corner. The wind diminishes, the sun breaks out, and people emerge from their hiding places. I ask a man with a white mustache what is happening. He sees that I am wet, looks at me incredulously for a moment, until he realizes I am a tourist, and he says it is tornado season. When a tornado comes, I must run to a shelter. There is one in every building. In a few minutes, the sirens begin again, and this time I see the source: an aircraft rushes overhead, wailing a monotonous, hair-raising sound. I run up the hill and see funnel shapes looming, some fully formed; others, swirls of unstable vertical cloud, all scattered over the city. People are calmly lined up to enter the buildings. The streets are empty once again, and I run to a two-story red and yellow brick structure. I open the door. The room is so full that I have to shove in. I hide my face in the corner behind the door. The wind screams and the building vibrates. I glance up to look through the glass. The air is full of flying . . . shapes. The tornadoes in this country are like wolves attacking in a pack. Next in the dream, I find myself in a motel. It is night and the wind screams again. I hear a woman's voice crying, "Run! Run!" The windows are open and rain lashes in. The curtains whip insanely. I realize that Mindy and the children are in our van in the parking lot, in the storm. I want to bring them inside, but the wind is so strong that I cannot open the door, nor climb out the window. Why did they not come inside when the sirens blew?

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

Chapter 19
All That We Hold Dear

At first, the press contained exhaustive reports on the attacks, and investigators confidently boasted that they would soon catch the criminals. The truth that no person was hurt in the destruction of the killing facilities emerged for an instant early in the story about how abortion personnel on duty that day could not be found—neither hide nor hair, nor charred corpses. The news media marveled for less than half a day about the kind of organization required to carry off such a brilliant—and strange—maneuver that whisked away so many people, and by midnight this aspect of the story died a complete death in preparation for the next day's hysterical, earsplitting outrage from abortion proponents. That noise, too, subsided earlier than expected, and though Sterne thought the GiP had little comprehension of the depth of the organization behind the bomber/abductors, he realized that an intensive hunt for them would never end. Though he believed that all their trails vanished, no one doubted that the GiP was marshaling its strength and intelligence in an all-out attempt to find the perpetrators. From here on, the dogs searching for their trail would not be the baying kind.

A few days later, Sterne received information that security arrangements for abortion sites had been accelerated in response to the attack. The assassinations paused during this period, but he was intrigued by reports that a handful of the abortion sites had not complied with the intrusive government mandates: they remained open and relatively unprotected, despite the threat of forcible closure by the GiP. After Sterne received this information, press coverage made a fuss about this weakness being rebellious and cocksure. On the evening news, one abortionist in a flack vest waved a shotgun and verbally swaggered, "We're not closing for anyone, we're not your f<beep>ing cowards."

Sterne was relieved, finally, a month after the raids when there still were no suspects, either publically announced or secret.

In the next couple of months, life proceeded quietly at the Mollicoat Estate. Conferences and retreats continued without interruption. Stan remained in his office loft in the Ebenezer and returned to hosting and arranging travel for speakers and guests. Mindy and Stan danced with their folk club. They rode horseback and enjoyed the days as well as they could. Dr. Sterne and his family stayed in their Vancouver home while he practiced medicine, and the book discussions took place every third Friday evening as usual. Sterne did no traveling abroad. All their pleasant days rested upon an uneasy foundation of anxiety about whether or not the GiP would uncover them, but in time, Stan and Mindy became accustomed to the peril until it no longer haunted them. Sterne told Stan his guess that the GiP had curtailed aggressive investigation and likely was laying a trap. Sterne said, "They're thinking, 'Let's draw them to us.'"

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Though they lived in a rural area away from the troubles of Portland, Stan and Mindy were seeing misfits and vagabonds walking along the roads and probably camping in hidden coves in the vicinity of their cottage. There was wood smoke in the air. From time to time, a faint roar of distant gunfire echoed around them. Poachers, Stan thought. He and Dr. Sterne decided it was probably best for the Timmons family to move back onto the estate, when room could be found.

One Saturday afternoon, Bernard brought to the cottage a flat plastic case containing a new semiautomatic polymer carbine with a pistol grip and a case of .45 caliber ammunition. "The gun's a loaner," he said. "For home-defense. A permanent loaner, until you don't need it anymore, and that could be a long time, wherever you live." Bernard took up the gun, removed the magazine, pulled the action back to check the chamber, and put it back into the open case.

Stan gingerly picked up the gun. "Is it loaded?" he asked, as he pointed the gun up and looked at it closely.

"No, but don't take my word for it," Bernard said.

Stan returned the gun to the case and said, “I don’t know how to check it. I’ve never shot a gun before. How about you, Mindy?”

“I’ve fired one like that. It’s fun. You should take some lessons. I’m sure Bennett would help you. Or Anselm.”

“No, I don’t really want to. Well then, this’ll be your department,” Stan said. “Find a safe place to store it, okay?”

On another day, Sterne met with Stan and Mindy and outlined a detailed escape plan for his family, if it ever became necessary to flee the U.S. Sterne called it their Personal Evacuation Plan.

More and more people were moving to the Mollicoat Estate, and its residences were becoming crowded. Nearly all the cabins and houses were full, and many workers who lived on campus ate lunch and dinner in a corner of the large dining room, though they took breakfast in their individual dwellings. The only place for Stan’s family to live appeared to be the rambling, forlorn Ebenezer House containing his office; therefore, Sterne ordered that a complete renovation on it should begin, and Stan and Mindy were to move in as soon as possible. The plan was to perform the work in stages, beginning with constructing apartments in the rooms adjacent to and below his office. Stan joined in the labor until their living space was completed. Though they felt sad about leaving their cottage, they felt snug and secure in their new lodgings. They lived only in part of the house while the remainder of it remained cluttered and in disrepair. At least the roof did not leak. Stan looked at the bare boards on the south wall of their main room that had been his office, and decided to uncover the stained glass windows to brighten things up, when he had time.

Life settled into a semblance of normalcy. Humans can become accustomed to anything, and since perverse crimes and internecine conflicts had become commonplace around the world, the news media largely ignored them. The U.S. was becoming unsettled to the extent many other countries in the world had been 15 years before, while of course, those countries had become worse.

As apprehension receded on the Mollicoat Estate, dullness crept in with summer. Attendance at the conferences had dropped somewhat because people were afraid to travel, but the

campus was still busy with guests coming and going, and crowds of conference attendees wandering over the grounds. The Assembly gradually began to whisper in secret activity again. Mindy and Stan did not know what was happening, and Sterne had not told them anything. Stan did not think much about Tommy, having given up hope he could ever be found, and Sterne did not have any special assignments for Stan, though Stan felt that a major task might be looming.

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The idea surfaced in mid-July that the young adults and families should go on a weekend holiday to relieve their homebound fever. The last weekend of the month had no large conference scheduled, so it was possible to get away. Stan and Mindy needed more vacation than this, but it was an opportunity to escape for a few days and have fun. Anselm's fiancée, Coral, was visiting from North Carolina then, and an added benefit was that the Perseid Meteor Shower was beginning. According to Bernard, the waxing crescent of the moon would set just before midnight on Friday evening. The peak of the shower would be two weeks later, but Bernard said that there would be a worthwhile show in the black early morning at high elevation. Mt. St. Helens had been so active in recent years with earthquakes, eruptions, and dome growth that the Monument had been closed, but after an extended quiet period, the Monument Manager opened access again.

The older Sterne boys wanted to climb to the summit, or at least circle the mountain, but because they would have children with them, they decided instead to hike for three days and camp the two nights.

The 17-year-old twins, Isadore and Chryseis, were adult equivalents, as far as backpacking was concerned, and they were adept at helping younger children, having trained on Luther and Mallory, who were 14 and 11, respectively; but all the Sterne children could assist the Uchidas, whose children were younger still. Stan watched the bustle of preparation and put in a hand to make himself useful. There had been a spirited argument about the final itinerary. The Sterne boys advocated walking the entire south side and north into the blast zone, shuttling between the

beginning and end of their trail, but Mindy and Stan preferred to hike in and camp both nights in one place above a lake that Stan found on the map. This would mean less walking under loads of food and equipment. After hearing all the points, the boys conceded to Stan's prudence.

Leaving before daylight, they traveled in two vans. Stan rode in the front of one van while Anselm drove. Bennett drove the other van. Not until they left the city and farmland behind did Stan feel the burdens of everyday life slide from his shoulders and the tautness melt from his face. He opened the window and breathed deeply the conifer-perfumed air. It had rained on the mountain for a few days beforehand, but the clouds had passed, and the climate assumed the beginning of the dry summer season that lasted through August and meant haze from fires and pollution. For now, the air was clean and clear. The dry cones and resinous needles roasted in the hot sun, which shone down in angelic rays through the trees.

When they neared their selected trailhead parking area, they groaned in dismay at the sight of numerous pickup trucks, off-road vehicles, and trailers jumbled in a disorderly pattern. Anselm slowed and stopped before he reached the end of the road; he told the children and women to stay inside and got out to confer with the other men in a circle. Gray smoke wafted across the road ahead and they caught the sickly drift of smoldering plastic.

"I don't like this," Anselm said. "The pattern of parking is too random. And the vehicles also have a unifying theme, not a good one. They're trucks and vans and they're caked with dust and dried mud."

"I don't know what you mean," Stan said.

"Well, these people are not regular hikers. The trucks have seen heavy use in the woods. And there's trash. This is an encampment, but not for climbers, since this isn't the start of a climbing trail. That's further west."

"We ought to leave," Bernard said. "They look menacing. I wouldn't feel safe with them knowing about us, not to mention the chance of our vans being broken into or stolen."

"I agree," Anselm said. "Let's drive back down the road and turn east a little more. That way, we can walk up through the woods and join our trail, but at a different place."

Stan said, "But we're too late."

The other men looked up and saw what Stan had seen—a long-legged man approaching. He had straight, dark hair hanging out from the sides of a wool stocking cap.

"Howdy, howdy, and welcome!" the fellow called in a loud voice long before he arrived. "Come on in. There's plenty of room to camp. We have a nice place here. Nice people."

At that point, Mindy opened a van door and got out with Maxy, who had to go to the potty. They trotted off to the woods. The doors all opened now and everyone got out. The long-legged man twisted his body around right and left without moving his feet, and looked at them and smiled. Another man—short and silent—came up from the direction of the smoke and stared at all of them, his eyes lingering on each woman and girl.

The long-legged man continued blathering. "Where you all from? Some damn pretty oriental babies there, eh? This campground is outstanding. The government has installed cables in the trees to hang your food away from the pesky bears. There's a nice creek running through over there for water. We got firewood cut and tents put up for shelters. There's camping spots left and they've got firepits in them. It only costs $5.00 a day for camping, but nobody ever collects it, and you can see the latrines in the woods that-a-way. It's a nice place. Isn't the mountain beautiful? We had rain yesterday, but today's sunny. The nights are cold but the days are hot. If you want, we can haul your stuff in. How many are there of you? One, two, three . . . Sixteen, counting children. Damn. I see an ice ax there. Are you planning to climb? You know, you need a permit to climb to the summit. Those cost $100 and you get them at a grocery store back down the road. The man there who sells the permits? He looks like a mountain. Wears snowy white T-shirts and he's big at the bottom and pointed at the top. I don't think he's ever climbed the mountain himself. He weighs 400 pounds. He told me. It'd kill him to climb, but he makes a lot of money re-selling permits. Thinks he's Lord of the Mountain, the way he looks down on newcomers and raffles off those permits.

Don't you want us to help you carry your gear into the camping area? It'd be better to drive up closer. Pull in here and I'll help you back…"

They were in an awkward place. The children were running and tottering around in the woods, and the long-legged man was suffocating them with his nonstop, hyper-friendly chatter. Stan could see the uneasy looks on Anselm and Bernard. Bennett's expression was impassive, as he calculated how to escape the situation. The man continued to jabber loudly, getting up close to people and talking into their faces. They could hardly breathe, let alone have a private conversation about what to do. The women did not seem to notice anything wrong. The long-legged man would not stop talking, and the short man watched, not saying a word.

At last Bennett halted the steamrolling talker by interrupting in mid-sentence. "I . . . I wonder if you could show me the camping sites?"

"What's that?"

"May I see the camping sites?"

"Oh, sure. No problemo. Come right along. This is Shorts," meaning the short man. "I'm sure you'll like the camping sites. They're level and soft with pine needles, no roots and rocks, and there's a nice view through the trees. We're expecting to leave soon, anyway, maybe tomorrow, so in a few days there will be more room. You'll have the whole area to yourself. Are you staying for the weekend, or longer?"

Bennett snatched a camouflage-cloth gadget bag from under a van seat and marched toward the source of the smoke with the long-legged man and Shorts following, and Anselm whistled a pure, high-pitched tone. Upon hearing the signal, Mindy and Sarah corralled the children and assembled at the vans. Anselm spoke quietly and intently.

"We have to get away from here now! These men may be—" He only mouthed the word "dangerous" to avoid frightening the children. "Everyone get in the vans and *do not slam the doors!*"

They started up the engines, and talking via radios between the drivers' seats, Bernard and Anselm communicated what they would do, which was to turn around and drive slowly away.

"How's Bennett going to find us?" Stan asked.

"Wait a minute," Anselm answered tersely, watching in the rearview mirror.

Stan said, "Why did he walk right into their camp?"

Anselm did not respond immediately, but as he got further from the trailhead he began speaking in a low voice. Stan leaned over to hear better. Anselm said, "He has a global position locator, and so do we. We'll get down the road a mile and wait. There may not have been any hazard at all . . . If they wanted to capture us outright, or steal the vans and rob us, they would have done so at the first, maybe. But I think they assumed we were naïve enough to accept their hospitality. Bennett had to make a plausible excuse to draw the two men away so we could leave. He will scout their camp and see what they're up to—and how many people are with them."

"Aren't you being a little paranoid?" Stan asked.

Anselm glanced to Stan. "Maybe I am," he said. "Better paranoid and safe, with children."

They turned left at the intersection, went a short way, and pulled off at a turnout. Anselm swiveled around in his seat and explained to everyone that Bennett would join them shortly.

The radio buzzed and snapped softly from interference. In about five minutes, they heard Bennett's voice cheerfully say, "Hello, Anselm. Are you there?"

"Right-o!"

"I'm headed your way, off trail. I'll tell you when I reach the road. You'll have to retrieve me."

In a few minutes, Bennett contacted them again.

Anselm backed up several hundred yards and met him as he jogged along at a smooth pace. He jumped into the van, which then started forward and soon arrived again at the turnout. The vans drove along in tandem several minutes, looking for another approach to the mountain.

Bennett told what he had seen. "You were right, Anselm, to be cautious. They had a notable amount of stores. There must have been twenty men and a few women. I'd say they've been living in that location for the summer, and they don't have any forest parking permits, either. I guess the government isn't enforcing regulations. One of the trucks had bullet holes in it, and there was evidence—hair and bones—that they had killed game—deer

and bears most likely, for food, and not legally. They've been gathering huckleberries and fishing. Oddly, they had photographic equipment."

Anselm asked, "Perhaps we should go home, or to another part of the mountain? What do you think, Stan?"

"I think we'll be alright. We shouldn't go home. What's the closest we'll be to their camp?"

Bennett opened a map. "If we can push a route through the woods here, about two miles."

"That's pretty close." Stan glanced back and forth between Anselm and Bennett.

"Our camp site will be another several miles away," Bennett said. "We'll join the timberline trail, and then we move northeast away from there. We'll conceal our tents. I think we'll be perfectly fine. And besides, we are armed, as well." He patted a place at his hip.

"Oh. Is that why you weren't afraid to go into their camp?" Stan ventured.

"Well, are you asking if I'm a good shot? I am. That may seem strange for a surgeon, right? But what helped me get away was I left my medical kit behind with them. They assumed that we weren't leaving. It contains tools and drugs. From what I saw of their lifestyle and state of health, they'll need them. I hope *we* don't."

They found a dirt road on the left a little further along. It was more of a path with parallel tracks covered by conifer needles and leaves—an old road, unused for years. As they went along, Stan and some of the others had to get out and pull a few branches out of the way. At a place where a log blocked their passage, they stopped. "This is far enough," Anselm said. "The vans are invisible from the road. We can follow this track as far as it takes us toward the mountain. Well, let's pack up and go!"

Although the adults had spent hours packing at home, launching onto the trail took more time than Stan would have believed. Everyone had a dozen tasks to complete and it was half an hour before they got loaded up and were able to walk. Stan carried Maxy in a baby backpack and Mindy carried Chrysanthe in a pack on her front. The track maintained a gradual incline for another mile, following a creek, and then

changed into a single path and began climbing. The trail was marked with elk prints. Green-eyed deer flies and huge horseflies pestered them, and all shared in keeping the bloodthirsty insects from roosting on the young children's necks and cheeks until Bernard got out some all-natural repellent. They walked slowly and quietly, between trees, over logs, and under branches. Stan listened to the fresh breeze in the leaves, forgot the long-legged man and his squatter tribe, and felt the tension drain away.

At last, they joined a maintained and mapped trail coming in from their left. Then they crossed an untidy heap of logs serving as a bridge and came to a small lake of transparent water that rested over beds of green cold water plants carpeting the bottom. Across the lake in the far corner, waterfalls bounded over a moss-covered cliff. They stopped here for lunch, and at the lake edge, Guthrie found frogs, the only animated life they could see in the biting cold water.

Beyond the lake, the trail rose in busy switchbacks for a short section. Then it proceeded between a band of giant trees on their right and a wide ridge of jumbled lava boulders to their left above them. Behind the ridge appeared the mottled upper cone of Mt. St. Helens. The trail was firm underfoot, like gray cornstarch, dampened from the previous day's rain. The trail ahead began another series of steep switchbacks, and as the hikers climbed above the trees, the massive bulk of Mt. Adams heaved up on the eastern horizon. Deep pleasure of physical exertion swept over Stan. They removed their packs at a wide switchback, held the children's hands to keep them from falling down the side of the mountain, and let the sweat dry on their backs. Mindy dug out candy bars and broke them into pieces for everyone to eat.

Anselm scrutinized his map and pointed to a tiny white place with no contour lines. "Ahead is a flat cul-de-sac between two ridges. Unless it's a veritable rock garden, we should be able to camp there. It's higher and farther than we planned, but it should be safer. Plus, we'll have views of meteors and a splendid sunrise."

They took nearly another hour to climb over the next ridge. While the others waited on the trail, Anselm scouted the

prospective camping site—he had to leave the trail and work up two hundred yards around patches of stubby conifer trees that had gained footholds in the lava beds and among the boulders. Snow patches hid in the shadows.

When he reached the level area, he vanished from sight for a minute, and then called down on the radio. "This is perfect," he said. "Lots of room." Within the hour, the tents were erected, sleeping pads and bags spread out inside them, and most happily, suppers were cooking over gas stoves.

After baby Chrysanthe was fed and all the children were nestled into bed, the adults put on their extra clothing and sat late into the night sipping tea, talking, and watching the sky, as their bodies gradually chilled. An occasional meteor flashed down. After awhile, the others turned in, but Stan and Mindy cuddled for warmth, leaning back against a flattish boulder some yards above their camp. They were sitting on pads and had wrapped their goose down bags around themselves. As the sky darkened, the stars overhead blazed brighter than Stan thought possible, and the meteors began putting on a show more spectacular than Stan could ever remember. They sprinkled down along the horizon and flashed overhead like fiery needles with bright bulbs in them, which were explosions, and the larger meteors left glowing green trails.

Mindy and Stan oohed and aahed. After about 20 minutes, they dozed off, then they woke refreshed and watched the sky again, hardly noticing that they had slept. At about 3:00 a.m., Mindy and Stan found each other awake, both feeling consternation and wonder, because the intensity of the meteor shower had increased, a hailstorm of light, like silent lightning falling everywhere, aberrant and unreal. Alarmed, they returned to the camp circle and called Anselm, Bernard, Bennett, and Sarah. The twins woke, too.

They all dragged themselves out of their tents. For a few moments, Bernard gazed up and around at the sparks snowing down, and as he was regarded as the family astronomer, they waited for his opinion. He shook his head and said, "This is wonderful, but it's eerie and frightening. Nothing like it was anticipated. I have never heard of such a meteor storm as this, when it's still the early period. Either the predictions are off by

two weeks and this is the peak of the Perseids, which is impossible, or the storm will keep building and become . . . the meteor typhoon of the eons."

As they watched in awe while bundled up in their sleeping bags, a huge fireball emerged over the southeastern horizon. It appeared smaller than the moon, but unlike the moon, it visibly moved. Reddish orange, it sailed majestically overhead, pulling a tail of flame and smoke, casting shadows from the nearby rocks and behind the campers. The shadows on the ground moved in sync with the flaming ball in the sky.

"That's not a comet," Mindy said, her voice calm.

"It's a bolide," Bernard said, his upturned face illuminated by the object. "A traveler from far outside the solar system. I've never seen one before. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"A bolide?" Stan asked.

"A gigantic meteor that skips across the earth's atmosphere and returns into space."

"How large is that one?" Stan, again.

"Just guessing its altitude by the flickering in its tail . . . a couple thousand cubic meters. The size of a house."

Other meteors streaked overhead, several a second. The bolide faded into the west beyond St. Helens, and while they still looked after it, they all caught a singular bright flash on the edges of their vision. This meteor streaked downward at an oblique angle toward earth, and flames shot out from its central ball as it plummeted below the level of the observers and abruptly disappeared.

"It hit the ground!" Stan remarked excitedly.

Bernard pulled out a compass to take a bearing under his headlamp. "How far away when it made impact?"

Anselm considered, "Five or ten miles. I don't suppose we'd be able to find it on this trip. We'd have to come back to look another day."

"If this meteor episode continues, they might be common." Bernard paused, thinking. "They'll threaten satellites."

They heard a rumble like thunder.

"Twenty-eight seconds," Sarah said.

Bernard said, "About eight miles."

"In the end times, stars will fall from the sky." This was Mindy's voice in the dark.

No one had an immediate response for her bleak reference from the Bible. They all settled back into comfortable places.

"We might be near the end of the world, or not," Anselm said a few minutes later. "Some people look for Christ to rapture them into the sky. They expect to avoid the Great Tribulation, when suffering will be worse than it ever has been before. They're foolish if they think they'll escape all tribulations. The Holocaust and other genocides were unimaginable tribulation. If we go through a horror like those, it will be bad enough, and more than those who hold to escapist theology will have reckoned for. When tribulations come, as Jesus says they are sure to, people won't be prepared and will betray their faith. They will be sleeping. They *are* sleeping. Jesus said he was coming soon, but soon might be another 2,000 years."

"People think it's the Great Tribulation when they don't have toilet paper," Bernard said.

There was a chuckle around the group.

"'I saw a star fall from heaven unto earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; there arose a smoke out of the pit as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.'" This was the demure voice of Coral. She was quiet in this talkative group, not accustomed to the keen competition for air space, and so she had surprised everyone. "'And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world—he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.'"

"That's encouraging," remarked Bernard. "We're near a bottomless pit—caldera St. Helens."

"The meteors set me to thinking how Jesus said he saw Satan fall like lightning," said Coral. "But any one of us might go to Jesus tonight or tomorrow—and we need to be ready. Our individual ends could be any time."

Bernard changed the subject back to astronomy. "There's an infinitesimal chance that the asteroid Apophis could hit Earth in 2036—there are people who track these NEO's—near Earth objects. Some astronomers predict that the comet Swift-Tuttle,

which produced this storm, will hit in the year 2126. The end of the world might result from such a catastrophic event. Swift-Tuttle is ten kilometers in diameter."

"What if this is the comet breaking up?" Stan asked.

"No, this is debris from the comet's path," said Bernard. "Um . . . this could be pieces of the comet pulled off by a gravitational effect, maybe from the sun. But from what I've read, this wouldn't be a prelude for the comet hitting earth."

"Maybe people will begin to think about the meaning of their lives," Sarah said. She and Bennett were sitting side by side, looking up, with a sleeping bag draped over their shoulders.

"For a month and they'll fall back into their routines," countered Anselm. "Remember, the sun rises every day, and that's a remarkable astronomical event people hardly feel awe about. Their very lives are miraculous, and yet people throw them away. When St. Helens blew up in 1980, it was national news for a year, and then people in the Northwest got accustomed to it. Dad said he would look toward the mountain to see if it was sending up ash plumes, just like he would check the sky for the weather. It's like people in the San Francisco Bay area being used to earthquakes. Someday there'll be the Big One. Someday Mt. Rainier will bury Seattle."

"That's all we need to complete our weekend: an earthquake and a volcanic explosion," Stan said with mild sarcasm. "Oh, did you see the movie *San Francisco* with Clark Gable? More than 3,000 people died from the 1906 quake…"

And so they conversed under the rain of cold fire until the eastern horizon blushed around the Adams massif, and what had been shadowy humps of uncertain size came into perspective for the mountains they were. Meteors no longer streaked visibly, except for the largest ones that rocketed down at random intervals. Everyone who was still awake climbed into the tents and slept until well after sunrise when the insides of the tents grew hot and the children demanded breakfast.

After washing up, they packed lunches, scrabbled down to the trail, and began walking north at a leisurely pace. They continued hiking all morning, taking frequent breaks for the children's sake and to enjoy the vistas and flowers. Clouds and fog, which had filled the valleys below like lakes, burned away.

As they all walked, Anselm and Coral stayed behind the others to talk in private, and after awhile they hurried to catch up. Stan noticed the fetching triangular patches of sweat beads on Coral's cheeks, under her eyes. A little after noon, the hikers reached a feeder trail on the right leading five miles down a canyon back to roads, but they continued forward on the timberline trail toward an area named the Plains of Abraham. Forms of gray, dead trees stood like totems over the rugged, rolling landscape. The hikers' feet kicked up swirls of dry, dusty ash. Natural gardens of lush purple, white, red, and yellow flowers and green vegetation ornamented the grayness, while the glowing blue sky covered the land as a shield against the frightful, aggressive night. Once, a flaming meteor arced earthward in the broad daylight, leaving behind a smudgy contrail.

The hiking trail switched back and forth each time it climbed down and up canyon slopes. The views of the mountain changed minute by minute, displaying the naked results of explosive strength from the earth's heart and the slow wearing of wind, rain, and snow. A sudden plume of steam pushed up from the crater and drifted overhead. When the hikers came to the Plains of Abraham, it seemed a level desert, a desolation, drab and dead, traversed northwest by a receding line of rock cairns that marked the course of the trail toward a pass that entered the blast zone center. This area was the halfway point of their day's journey. They would eat lunch here and turn back.

They walked off the trail up the gentle slope toward the mountain and found a place for their picnic. The children skipped around in loops and explored until the meal was ready, and then sat quietly in a close circle as they ate. Stan finished his meal and stretched out on an extra sweater next to the baby, who was sleeping on a blanket. Stan breathed deeply, closed his eyes, and in a minute he also was asleep. The others remained silent, listening to the wind whispering by. A pair of mountain bicyclists sprinted along the trail below them, stirring up dust.

Anselm asked into the air, "I wonder why this is called the Plains of Abraham?"

Coral said, "Perhaps he saw this panorama when he looked at Sodom and Gomorrah after they burned."

The day flowed by and the time neared when they should begin the return to their camp. Anselm and Bernard wanted to climb higher from here and cross over the ridge and rejoin the timberline trail at a place farther along. Bernard said, "It will only take thirty minutes more."

"I'll join you, if that's okay with everyone," said Bennett, "if I'm not shirking my responsibilities. How would you like to come?" he asked his children. Kiyohira and Mutsumi, energetic at ages eight and six, were eager for more adventure.

"I'd be happy to head directly to the trail with Chrysanthe," Mindy said, "and take Guthrie, so you can go, Sarah. Stan can take Maxy, whichever way he goes. When he wakes." She looked toward her napping husband and bent down to pick up the baby.

"Yeah. Guthrie's nearly reached his hiking limit." Sarah was holding him, his arm around her neck and legs around her waist. "It will be hard enough for us, without adding more climbing. He's going to need to be carried partway as it is. I'd like to climb to the ridge, too, but you should have help with the two children."

Coral spoke up. "I'll go with Mindy."

"That's a nice offer," Sarah said, smiling. "Thanks."

Stan woke at hearing the animated voices and sat up. He fearfully looked around at the barren environment, as if he did not know where he was.

"Whew," he said when his confusion cleared away, and he stretched the stiffness from his arms and shoulders.

"Some of us are hiking up to the ridge there," Anselm said to him. "Are you joining us, or would you rather go with your wife and kids on the trail?"

"Here, help me put Chrysanthe in the frontpack," Mindy said.

Stan said, "Ah. A view from there would be fantastic, but I don't want to carry Maxy on rough ground. Maybe I should go with you, Mindy."

"I'll carry him, if you like," offered Coral, "I don't mind."

"Are you sure?" Stan asked dubiously.

"Go on, Stan," Mindy answered with a touch of impatience. "We will be fine. Here, help me. If she wakes up, she'll be hungry and want to nurse."

"Alright." Stan helped load the sleeping baby into the pack. "We'll join you in about half an hour."

"We'll go fast," Anselm said. "You have a radio, my dear sister?" he asked Mindy.

"Sure do. Call when you reach the trail again, so we can find each other."

"We're on channel three. But here, take a telephone, too." He held his out to her.

"I won't need it. It's added weight."

"Only a few ounces."

"There's no dependable signal up here, anyway."

"Well . . ." Anselm let the matter go.

"We should be able to see you from the ridge," Bernard chimed in.

They waved and went separate directions, the larger group heading up toward a narrow gash that cut into the mountain, and the smaller group picking its way down toward the main trail. Stan and the others slowed the pace when they came to the foot of the rocky ridge that bordered the plain, and from then on, they were forced to scramble. The Uchida children made it a challenge to not use their hands as they primly stepped from lava boulder to lava boulder with insect-like traction. The party reached the ridge and stared at the mountain and to the horizons, especially north to Mount Rainier, unobstructed from their viewpoint.

Stan looked below toward the trail, but saw no evidence of Mindy and the others.

"I wonder," Anselm said, "if it was a good idea to separate."

It took as long clambering down as it did up—and when they neared the trail Anselm pushed his radio call button.

There was no response, and he repeated the attempt.

"Nothing," Anselm said. "Were their batteries good?"

"They were strong before we left the house," Bernard said.

Anselm looked up and down the trail, as did the others, but no one detected any movement.

"We don't know if they're in front of us or behind," Bernard said. "It wouldn't be hard to go back and see."

"Maybe they stopped for a bathroom break," Stan suggested, not terribly concerned.

"I'll go." Bennett set his backpack on the ground and started at a run. The rest of them sat where they were and got out water, and then the children found trees to climb. Bennett returned sooner than anticipated because they all had assumed he would walk along with Mindy and Coral and the three children.

He was breathless when he reached those who waited. "I ran . . . to where we left the trail . . . it's not far . . . I suppose they're ahead of us."

"Okay, there's nothing to worry about," said Anselm. "Let's step lively."

They began walking along hurriedly, expecting to see the young women and children around every turn of the trail. They passed the canyon trail leading left down to the roads.

Stan had not been worried, but now thoughts that something had gone wrong began to creep through his mind. He walked faster, took the lead, and moved ahead. Wordlessly, the others followed, and the line stretched out. Time crept along maddeningly. He kept walking fast, but could not keep up this pace much longer. Suddenly, he stopped dead and turned around. Anselm nearly plowed into him. Stan's heart raced with the exertion. The others, who had lagged behind, reached them in another minute.

"They couldn't have gone this far," Stan said through his panting. "We should have caught them. Bennett, you didn't go all the way to where we separated—where we ate lunch?"

Bennett shook his head.

"Why not!?" Stan exclaimed in a hard-edged voice. "What if the baby had dropped something—a, a pacifier—and they went back to find it!"

Unperturbed by his outburst, Bennett said, "Well, if they went back, then they are still behind us." And then he added quietly, "It's my son, too, who's missing."

Anselm tried the radio again and received no response.

Stan groaned. "I don't know what to do. I'm sorry, Bennett." He had hoped for a simple resolution so they could continue their enjoyable weekend. "Did anyone look to see if we left anything behind at our picnic spot?"

"I don't remember that anyone did," said Bernard.

Sarah said, her voice cheerful, “Bernard is fresh, he and Anselm should run all the way to the place where we saw them last, and the rest of us continue toward our camp. If they are further on, we’ll catch up.”

“Good idea,” Anselm said.

He and Bennett turned away and checked the compact pistols they carried. Anselm noticed Stan watching them and said, “You never know.” And they also ensured that each group of them had a working radio and a phone, and they agreed to make contact every quarter hour, or as soon as they found the missing people.

Anselm and Bernard took off running. Still expecting a simple solution, Stan and the others continued south along the trail. Now that there was cause for worry, Stan refused to think about how to cope with losing his wife and children, because surely everyone was fine. He tried not to think about anything, but trudged on doggedly and watched ahead. When the radio spluttered with Anselm’s voice, his heart lurched and he swung around to Bennett.

Bennett pulled the radio from its holster, and before he answered, shook his head. “It’s been fifteen minutes, Stan. They’re just checking.”

Anselm and Bennett each confirmed they had seen nothing.

Stan and company tramped along. Less than an hour later, when Anselm and Bernard reached their picnic place, they radioed that they had seen no one. Now, they all were concerned. Anselm said, “We are coming back as fast as we can. You go on to camp and make food. I’m calling Dad to see if he has any ideas.”

There was nothing to do but walk, wait, and pray. About twenty minutes later, Anselm was on the radio again. His voice was grave and controlled, and that itself made Stan despair.

“Dad says he thinks Bernard and I should walk off the mountain down the canyon trail that we passed before. We ruled out a cougar and them becoming lost. A cougar, maybe . . . He’s going to fly out and see what he can see from the air. We’ll be losing daylight soon. There’s a landing strip north of Battle Ground where he will borrow a car and pick us up. You ought to camp overnight, because if the squatters are still at the trailhead,

you won't be able to slip past them, and in the dark, it will be hard to walk through woods with children. You could come back up the trail and join us, but it's a long way, and you should keep going in the chance Coral and Mindy are ahead of you."

Stan and the others labored forward. At last, they came to the place below their camping site and yelled up. No one answered. That Mindy and Coral had sped forward was Stan's last hope, but when they reached the tents, no one was there, and they found no signs anyone had been there. Hearts aching and fretful, and cumbrous with preoccupation, they busied themselves with meal preparation and washing. When they put the children to bed, everyone gathered close together to pray. As the children quietly dozed off, the sky darkened and meteors began their history-making show.

Bennett's telephone rang.

Stan stared at Bennett and said, "I thought there's no signal."

"He's using a satellite. It's Dr. Sterne."

The adults, and the twins—who could not sleep—collected away from the tents, and Sterne asked to speak with Stan.

Stan walked uphill from the others and tripped on a rock, while Bennett and Sarah watched him anxiously. Stan regained his balance and turned the volume down on the telephone. He listened for a long while, grunting "uh-huh" over and again, sniffing and wiping his eyes. At last, he turned off the power to save the battery, dropped his arm, and stumbled back to the others. When he reached them, he fell and caught himself on his hands on the sharp rocks.

"Are you okay?" Bennett helped him up.

Stan was breathing hard and his face twisted tumultuously. He looked at his hands, which were cut and raw. "Let's . . . sit . . . down." His voice did not sound like his own.

They sat on the uncomfortable lava blocks.

In a few moments he began. "I don't know how . . ." He hesitated, trying to control his breathing, and then went on. "The children are safe. Guthrie is safe."

Sarah muffled her joyful cry of, "Oh, thank the Lord," and Stan went on. "Mountain bikers—not the ones we saw. Some bikers peddling down the canyon trail found them about a mile below the circuit trail we were on. The children were thirsty,

and Guthrie scared and dirty and bruised. Maxy especially had been crying, and he seemed numb. But apparently, Guthrie had gathered Max and Chrysanthe in one place and comforted them the best he could . . . Amazing for a four-year-old . . . The bicyclists left their bikes behind and carried the three children down to the road to the village. Dr. and Mrs. Sterne have them now at a motel. Anselm and Bernard came upon some of Mindy's gear down on the canyon trail and searched the area. They found the bicycles. Mindy's and Coral's backpacks had been ransacked and tossed into a ravine."

Fear and horror mounted in the hearts of Sarah, Bennett, Isadore, and Chryseis, as they knew that bad news hovered over them, about to strike.

A cold chill tingled over Stan's skin. He took several breaths, broke and wept, and exclaimed, "They found Coral's body! She was half naked and over the edge of the ravine, on the rocks!"

Sarah and Bennett sobbed out in croaking voices, trying to keep from waking the children, and Stan joined in the outpouring of anguish. The twins wept quietly. Sarah jumped up and cried out, "No! No!" almost bursting with the effort of holding back. She then clutched desperately at Bennett.

When Stan recovered slightly, he went on, spitting fury. "They raped her, the bastards. They smashed her and threw her away!"

Stan could speak no more. He bowed his head toward his chest, squeezed his eyes tight shut and moaned a long silent moan. A short moment later, he looked up to stare at the sky, perceiving, but not comprehending the heartless spectacle of meteors raining down. Bennett trembled with anger.

Sarah had to ask the question. The truth could not be avoided. "What about Mindy? Did Bernard and Anselm find her? Did they *find* her?!"

For the moment Stan had mastered his emotions. Somehow, he was able to distance himself from the reality—he had to speak and communicate. He shook his head. "No. She might have escaped, but Dr. Sterne thinks the murderers still have her."

"Who? Who was it, Stan? Who did this?" Sarah said, agony distorting her voice.

Chryseis said, "The long-legged babbler and his gang."

"Yes," Stan said. "Your dad believes it was them. I think so, too. There were tracks and fresh horse manure along the canyon trail late today. That's all they know right now. Law enforcement will hunt for them tonight and raid their camp, but Dr. Sterne thinks that they probably already vacated it. The bastards must have been up here looking for females. Maybe they tracked us. I hate, *hate*, to imagine . . . Dr. Sterne thinks, from what Anselm said, that Coral stabbed one of the abductors and they killed her in a rage. At least . . . At least they didn't harm the children, not physically."

Sarah, having personal insight into this tragedy, spoke with emotion other than grief. It was admiration and respect. "Stan, maybe your wife bargained with them and agreed not to resist if they spared the children."

"Maybe. Maybe," Stan said mournfully. "Maybe you're right. Or they didn't consider killing the children worth . . ." He sighed and tightened his fists. ". . . the trouble."

On the east side of Mt. St. Helens.

I walk down the hill to the Union Hall that once was a Safeway grocery. Now it is a childcare center. I go inside and watch the children playing. Two of them are my own children, but they are older, and there is something else different, too. I am excited and call them over, but I cannot speak further because I am asleep in bed and am unable to raise myself to consciousness. I struggle to greet them and tell them that I love them, but no words come. I fight harder to speak. I manage to talk about their mother, and they are interested that I know these details, but whenever I talk about myself, they draw blanks and look away. They do not recognize me! I realize that I am but a phantom from a nonexistent past. These are not my physical children, but they are Mindy's, and they are different in appearance because they have a father in that other world, the one I visit in sleep.

–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons

The Great Salt Lake from the east.

Chapter 20
In the Open

Stan awoke at midnight, alert and restless. He crawled from the tent and gingerly walked up the mountain a hundred yards in the dark. Meteors rained down as on the previous night, except they were no longer a wonder, rather they were bitter daggers of horror, like the demons of Satan that Coral had imagined, slicing the tender flesh of atmosphere, falling from the heavens to rally together before infesting the earth. Stan heard the sudden crunching of steps behind him higher up, and his heart leaped in alarm. He whirled around with fists involuntarily raised to ward off an attack, but it was only Bennett, wearing a headlamp and making his way down from the ridge above. Bennett did not see Stan until his brother-in-law spoke, "Hey."

"What? Stan, is that you?"

"I can't sleep"

"I couldn't either. I've been awake all along."

"I think we should pack up and leave now," Stan said. "I want to be with my children. I was too exhausted to go earlier, but I've had an hour's rest; that's enough."

"Well, I might as well walk as stay up here. I'd rather be helping in the search for Mindy, or . . . anything. I think Sarah would agree, once she's awake, and I'm sure she'd be happier to be with Guthrie. The children will be okay getting up now and walking in the dark, don't you think?"

Stan did not hesitate. "Yes. They're tough. It'll be slow, but once we're on the trail, it shouldn't be a problem."

"I'll call Dr. Sterne and tell him we're coming."

Packing up in the cold and dark was excruciating. But the twin girls had jumped up and knew what to do, which was to pull the youngest children out of the tents still in their sleeping bags so they could stay warm and groggy until they actually had to walk. The twins appeared to have done such things before in extreme circumstances.

Wearing headlamps or carrying small flashlights, the adults painstakingly ferried gear and small clinging bodies down the slopes to the trail, and once there, they packed away the children's sleeping bags, gave them dried fruit to eat, and everyone began plodding down the trail. Stan felt relieved to be moving closer toward light, family, and support. They did not avoid the squatter campground because, except for trash, it was empty, as Bennett had confirmed from Dr. Sterne. But the site had already been cordoned off with yellow tape, which they walked around. A van with its engine running and a driver were waiting for them in the public parking area; everyone piled into the one vehicle and rode several miles to the village and motel where Dr. Sterne had said he would have rooms ready for them.

When they arrived, the motel was quiet, but brightly lit and wide awake on one end of the building. Two sheriff's deputies had been available for comfort, if for nothing else, and were just departing. Dr. and Mrs. Sterne came outside and there were hugs and tears, doors opening and closing, lights flashing into the parking lot, and the young children were trundled into beds. The twins couldn't sleep and found a movie on television that they wanted to watch.

Stan right away had looked in at Maxy and Chrysanthe sleeping in a large bed, side-by-side. He felt how miraculous it was that the children were alive and safe. Mrs. Sterne had been sitting in the room with them and she came back inside a few minutes behind Stan. He touched each child once more. "I'll be back in a while," he said.

Tasks completed and everyone settled, Dr. Sterne, Stan, and Bennett met in the breakfast room adjacent to an outdoor patio. It was now 5:30 a.m. They sat in soft chairs pulled together.

Sterne began talking in a low, somber voice. "Anselm and Bernard helped in the recovery of Coral's body and joined the search for the brigands. And . . . for Mindy . . . The Assembly does not have resources to conduct this kind of open investigation without exposure, and so we must rely for now upon regular law enforcement. With Anselm and Bernard close to the center of activity, we might find ways to lend an invisible hand. I've called a half dozen units, each of three men, to privately look for the brigands, but this is all we can risk. I'm

afraid it might not be enough, and I'm disappointed at the weak commitment from law enforcement. This type of crime has become too common."

Stan could not find the power of speech to ask, and so Bennett did it for him. "What hope that Mindy is alive?"

Dr. Sterne jumped up from his chair, walked to a window and stared into the darkness. When he regained his emotional self-control, he came back and sat again. In a dead flat tone he answered, "I . . . I . . . Until we find her body, I have hope. I don't expect she's alive, but that's not my worst fear. What I fear for Mindy is her torment from hating them for what they have done to her, and what they did to Coral. I would like nothing more than to slaughter these corrupt skinsacks, but this is nothing to what she must feel. The degradation. I can't find anything in me to forgive them. The best I can achieve is to pour out my love and prayers for my daughter, and for my other children, Anselm, and Coral's family, and my grandchildren who have lost their mother, and for you, Stan. For you."

Stan had been fending off waves of emotion with a seawall of urgent activity, but the barrier was breached and he sobbed uncontrollably, without trying to hide. When this passed, he rose and went to the room where his children slept. Mrs. Sterne kissed Stan on the cheek and left. Stan walked around the room. Baby Chrysanthe took a stuttering breath and let it out in a deep sigh while she slept. There was a half bottle of formula lying on the bed beside her. Stan picked it up and set it on the bedstand. Mindy had been nursing her, but now it looked like Chrysanthe would have to be weaned from breast-feeding. She was old enough—six months old—and had been eating some solid food already. Stan wept fresh tears and collapsed on top of the other bed, rolled himself up in the blankets, and plunged into an engulfing sleep.

A few hours later, he awoke and the sun was shining. Chrysanthe began crying again, and would not stop unless she was held and rocked. Mrs. Sterne attended to her, while Stan focused on Maxy, who, when left alone, sat in a glazed stupor, sniffling. Guthrie seemed to be holding himself together. The family picked up the second van, stopped at a restaurant for a late breakfast, and returned to the Mollicoat Estate, which they

found in communal mourning over Coral's death. Her parents were on the way from North Carolina. Bennett and Sarah, and Stan had been invited to stay at the Bluff House, and that evening—a Sunday—at sunset, Assembly staff members gathered outside the door. They held candles and sang lovely Germanic and other hymns and somber folk songs, while bullfrogs croaked in the pond to the south.

No word about Mindy or the outlaws came in through the night. Stan woke at 2:00 a.m. and sat in their dark room on a couch with a sleeping bag, his emotions in turmoil. The children slept on. If he had gone with Mindy and Coral instead of climbing the ridge, this all would have turned out differently. The outlaws might have left the women alone. Or he might have been killed. *Outlaws?* Stan scoffed at the romantic myth of the cowboy outlaw. These men were perverted murderers. Such thoughts rolled through his mind over and over. To break the cycle, he switched on a light and tried to read. He did eventually fall asleep again for a few hours. At daylight in the bathroom, he considered his own image in the mirror. He had not shaved since they left for St. Helens and he decided to allow his beard to grow until they found Mindy, and only shave if she did not like him with a beard. He dressed the children and took them to the Chinook Assembly kitchen for breakfast.

Chrysanthe wanted to be held every waking moment, and Grandma Timmons took over this job. Sarah and her children would be spending the day at the Bluff House to help. Monday was a workday, and Stan reported to the office about 10:00 a.m. Every step, every phone call or letter, every spoken word, was unspeakably arduous. He walked up to the Bluff House for lunch and got on the floor to play a game with Maxwell, and fell asleep. Sarah called Stan's supervisor, who said that he was disturbed that Stan had insisted on working at all.

Late in the evening, Anselm and Bernard arrived home. Anselm and Stan solemnly shook hands and hugged. Anselm showed no grief—a smoldering intensity smothered it up.

They sat at the kitchen table and Bennett joined them. Dr. Sterne brought out food and drink, while Anselm began telling their story.

"The first night, Bernard and I rode with a Forest Service law enforcement officer in a general search for the brigands. We headed north, covering back roads. There's not much to tell about that part. It was a long night. At the staging area for the next day, before we got back into his pickup, I told the officer that I carried a handgun and had a permit to carry it concealed. He thanked me for informing him, but advised that I should stay back if it came to a gun battle. I suggested that he should be armed with a shotgun, but he didn't think this was necessary. I then spoke with one of the sheriff's deputies we had befriended, and he opened his trunk and gave me a shotgun and a belt of ammunition, and I put these in the back of our pickup. The Forest Service officer watched me do it, and I said, 'It's for Bernard. They've got our sister.' The officer—his name was Curtis—shook his head, but didn't say anything.

"We drove so many miles, fulfilling our part in a coordinated search pattern on forest roads. About noon, we came around a bend and saw a truck and horse trailer parked along the side of the road. We pulled over to observe from a distance. A tire lay next to the truck, but there was no activity. Horses were tied nearby. Officer Curtis radioed in his position and asked for immediate backup, and then we went in reverse down the road until the trailer wasn't visible. We waited, but I was getting nervous. Bernard and I got out and he loaded the shotgun. We were standing behind the truck. The next instant, we were under fire—the truck was being peppered from all sides.

"Bernard emptied the shotgun into the trees on the other side of the road in a wide pattern to give Curtis the best chance to escape, and we ran back a hundred yards and entered the woods. Bernard reloaded. We circled around behind the gunfire, split up and came up behind a brigand who was taking potshots at the truck. I screamed to him to drop his gun, and he wheeled around, weapon in hand. Bernard and I both fired as he turned. He fell. I checked him, and it was the fellow called 'Shorts.' I had hit him in the head and heart/lungs. We watched him die, Dad. We knelt down and watched. He breathed deeply three or four times, about ten seconds between each breath. Blood oozed from his mouth, and his breath made steam in the air and then stopped. We reloaded. Next, we approached the pickup to see

about Officer Curtis. Just then, two other law enforcement vehicles arrived, and the officers engaged the shooters in the woods on the other side of the road. We found Curtis wounded and lying across the floor of the truck, but he was conscious. Bernard—very grim faced—skipped off to join the firefight. I tended to Curtis with another officer. It took an hour for a helicopter to arrive to take Curtis, and by then the brigands had been killed or ran. They fought to the end, four of them, and wouldn't surrender. Mindy was not with them, Stan."

"Then the brigands won't give up any information," Stan stated flatly.

"I don't know why, Stan. Why they fought like that."

"Maybe she escaped during the fight?"

"She probably was with another band. I'm afraid that fighting these brigands might have made it easier for others to flee. When they packed up Saturday night, they probably scattered, with plans to regroup someplace far away."

Dr. Sterne brought up his usual concern. "Do you think you drew too much attention to yourselves. . . by, by shooting the brigand?"

"Maybe, Dad, maybe. The officers were very supportive. They believe that we saved Curtis's life. A commander conducted procedural interviews on the location and concluded that we acted in self-defense. There'll be a review from higher-ups, but I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"Well, I had to ask."

"I understand."

Sterne hesitated before saying, "There's another question."

"What?"

"How . . . How do you both feel about having killed a man?"

"Dad!" cried Bernard. "He might have been the one who killed Coral!"

"I know. And maybe he spared Mindy."

"If she was spared. We don't know."

"That's true. But you killed a man. A human being. How are you dealing with that, boys?"

Anselm assumed a stony silence, but at last Bernard spoke in a weak voice. "It's too much to think about right now."

"Well, when you want to talk, know that I'm available."

"There's one more thing, Dad," resumed Anselm, wanting to reach out to his father. "The police offered to give us the horses and the trailer. I told them 'yes' on the horses, but the trailer is junk . . . Dad, I . . . I do . . . I do want to talk about . . . Cor . . ." He swallowed and said, "Coral."

"I know. And about how you shouldn't have been camping on the mountain with those criminals up there, so close."

"Yeah. That, too."

† † †

Coral's funeral was on Tuesday. With her parents' blessings, she was buried in the small cemetery on the estate, on the south side at the edge of the woods overlooking the pond. Dr. Sterne spoke about how kind and pure of heart she had been in her brief life. Though they had been engaged, Anselm had not given her a ring, and before they sealed the coffin, he put a gold band on her finger, kissed his fingertips and laid them on her rigid cheek, and whispered, "Goodnight my bride, my sister. Sleep well."

By the weekend Anselm left the campus on a mission with friends to search for the outlaws. Stan wanted to join him, but Bernard said bluntly, "Your lack of fighting experience would pose a liability." Stan was crushed, but decided he would better help Mindy by staying with the children, and he moved back into their Ebenezer apartments. The rest of that week, there was still no word about Mindy, and Stan did not know how he would survive their upcoming wedding anniversary next Tuesday.

Sarah and Mrs. Sterne cared for the children during the day, but wisely stepped back and let Stan keep busy with them in the evenings. He looked forward every day to picking them up at the Bluff House and returning to their own home.

Denial and hope weakened with time. The belief that Mindy was dead began to be fixed in his mind. The outlaws probably killed her and dumped her body in an isolated place. Whenever he was alone, Stan agonized endlessly, but there was only the cruel certainty that she was gone and he could do nothing about it, absolutely nothing! In his unsettled condition, he became dissatisfied with the passive office work, and felt ready to tackle an adventurous job. His anger with the outlaws gave him a measure of recklessness that had been dormant in his character

since that confrontation with Schenk. Stan's only other activity in life thus far that entailed danger was trying to find Tommy, and so Tommy came to mind as Stan considered what he might do. He was jolted by the realization that his loss of Mindy was of a similar magnitude to Tommy's loss of Beth.

+ + +

After a quiet dinner gathering with the Sternes on the night of his third wedding anniversary, as Stan showered in preparation for bed, he deeply mourned Mindy's absence and her suffering, if she still lived. He did not know anything of her fate. His tears flowed with the showering water.

As he dressed for sleep, he again thought of Tommy, and he was strangely overwhelmed with pain for his friend. "I wasn't capable of understanding Tommy's trauma before," he said to himself. As he climbed into bed, he remembered Beth's funeral of almost four years ago and the funny Catholic priest who told Stan that he ought to marry Mindy. He also had said something about helping the father of the aborted baby. Late that night, Stan awoke and dug into his dream journal to see if he had made any notes about this, and he had. His words sketched how the priest said that Stan should find out about the events of Beth's death, that this might help Tommy. How could he learn this after so many years? And exactly what could make a difference to Tommy? In the morning, Stan made an appointment to speak with Dr. Sterne.

They met in the upper floor of the decrepit log mansion, in a small room opening onto a balcony—the same balcony Mindy and Beth ate lunch on years before after the cross country race. Since the night was cool, Dr. Sterne had carried up firewood and lit a fire in the fireplace, which was burning warmly when Stan arrived. There were two chairs pulled up facing the blaze, and Sterne opened a briefcase and offered Stan a glass of wine. They stared into the fire.

Stan began. "I can't wait helplessly any longer."

"You wish to search for Mindy? We've issued an offer of a reward, and published photographs of her. Anselm and his friends have turned up nothing."

"If there was anything I could do about her . . ." Stan said with resignation. "But let me ask you a question. Is it important to stop the Octopus? Is he still disrupting the Assembly's work? I want to resume the search for Tommy."

"Oh." Sterne had not expected this. "But why?"

Stan explained at length what he had been thinking and feeling.

Sterne's right leg began trembling up and down on his toe, pushing off the floor, and he interrupted Stan in midsentence. "The Octopus is still killing, Stan, despite extremely tight security from the GiP, and he's expanding his target list. Finding him is no less important than it was at the beginning. You should know that there's much jeopardy if we resume this project. Finding your friend will help you come to terms with Mindy's abduction, but the danger of discovery is greater than before, because the GiP is laying a trap for Sherman. Remember the foulmouthed abortionist on television? The one who refused to comply with government security arrangements? He is live bait. Because the GiP monitors every movement around the killing sites, you can't pick your nose within a block without being recorded. There's a chance Sherman will be lured to one of them, a chance, and if you are at the right place, you'll find him. The probability is, however, that if he attacks one of these places, either your timing will be off or the GiP will apprehend him. There are three killing sites not yet in compliance, one in Virginia and another in Salt Lake City. The third is here in Portland. If you find him, convince him to come home with you. The GiP will follow you, so he must stay in disguise, in character, until he arrives here and we blend him in. Be prepared for surprises and flow with them. We have techniques . . ."

Dr. Sterne took a sip of his wine. Stan stood up and put another chunk of wood on the fire. Hot sparks from the jostled coals flew up into the chimney and some energetic sparks popped, spun onto the floor, and fizzled.

"Where should I go?" Stan asked.

"Our theory of clandestine activity is 'hide in the open,'" Sterne resumed. "We are exactly what we seem to be, but more. The Assembly could give you a different identity, but it would collapse under scrutiny. You could search here on your and Thomas Sherman's home turf, but I disqualify it because

Sherman is smarter than this, and we are, too. Salt Lake is where his career began—maybe it will end there. So, you should travel to Salt Lake City and live in a house that the Assembly uses to observe the abortion site. You'll visit our friends there, the Briggs family, while you interview for a teaching job at a certain private school. I think that's the course to take. I'll make the arrangements right away. School probably begins there before Labor Day—I'll check to be sure. If so, you'll have less than a week to get to the interview. But if the school I'm thinking of has no openings now—and they probably won't—they might by midyear or the next."

"Okay. Sounds fine. There is . . . I don't know if you would know about this, but at least you could steer me in the right direction. At Beth's funeral the priest who conducted the burial said that I should research how she died because it might bring healing to Tommy. Who should I talk with at this hospital to find out? It's been years, but I thought I'd try."

Sterne studied Stan musingly. To assist Stan, disclosing the leader of a ped was unavoidable.

"Yes, Stan, I *can* help you. Talk with your former pastor, Father Murray Schmidt."

"You're kidding!" Stan paused, thinking, before he continued. "Fr. Schmidt preached a very strange sermon after Beth died."

"He was by her side when she passed away."

"No! How do you know? Why didn't you mention this before? And why was he over in a Portland hospital?"

"Well, he's a member of the Assembly."

"But, he's theologically liberal. How does he fit in?"

"Certain of his positions are taken for the reason of deception—particularly his equivocation on abortion, and he is not the only person to do this. While some of his ideas are wrong, he believes in truth, liberty, and moral goodness. Our members represent a wide circle of ideologies. You often find your true friends in your foxhole."

"So, I should talk with him?"

"Not about the Assembly, if you please. He is, or was, a chaplain at the hospital, so it makes sense that you should speak to him about a person whom you knew. I've told you about him

to save you the trouble of a useless search. The hospital doesn't keep old records on chaplains."

Stan had one more question. "The Catholic priest I met at Beth's funeral. Was he a member of the Assembly?"

Sterne smiled and rang his empty wine glass with a fingernail. "I don't think so, but you shouldn't ask such questions."

The next morning, Stan called Fr. Schmidt's secretary and made an appointment for the afternoon. Returning to his old Vancouver neighborhood while driving the classic '48 Chevrolet sent his thoughts back to days of singleness—only now he carried an almost unbearable heartache. The Episcopal church building's brownish brick blended in with the wooded landscape, making the structure nearly invisible. Fr. Schmidt met him at the door and they walked outside around to a walled garden and courtyard in the back. A fountain softly gurgling masked the traffic noise. While the August air everywhere else was dry and hot, here it smelled refreshingly cool.

Fr. Schmidt seated himself in a comfortable caned chair and invited Stan to take one. Schmidt's wife emerged from the house. She was even more "progressive" than her husband and was a busy volunteer in a number of social activist groups. Stan thought she wore her gray hair close-cropped as a symbol of independence and practicality, but he had always found her to be polite and pleasant. This afternoon she seemed happy in the servant's role and offered coffee or other refreshment. Stan asked if she had fruit juice. Fr. Schmidt wanted coffee, and when she left for the kitchen he said, "I'm sorry to hear about your wife, Stan."

Stan nodded. "Thank you. The reason I asked to speak with you is not because of Mindy, but somebody else. Do you remember a girl who died from abortion complications at Providence Hospital? Her name was Elisabeth Telford. She was a friend of my wife, Mindy."

"Yes, I remember Beth. I remember well. I sometimes think of her, so my memory is current." Fr. Schmidt looked inwardly with a perplexing exultation.

"What was her passing like?"

Schmidt did not ask why Stan wanted to know. "I don't think this is a breach of confidence. Hmm. When I came to her room she looked . . . dead. She was motionless . . . pale. Black crescents under her eyes. But when I spoke to her, she became conscious. Her breathing became very rapid. I sat down beside her and held her hand, which was limp and cold, and I prayed. I read scriptures to her—the Psalms and Lessons for Morning Prayer. You understand, it had just passed midnight by my watch. I first read a Psalm of contrition. I think it was Psalm 25—parts of it. And when I read Psalm 116, Elisabeth seemed quickened and struggled to sit up, but couldn't. She whispered, and I bent down to hear, and she said, "Read it again, please." I did as she requested, and when I was done, she settled down onto the bed with her eyes closed. Her breathing slowed and she seemed to be at peace. Her hand gripped mine with a strength that slowly faded."

Schmidt stopped speaking as if he was reliving those moments in his memory, and then he continued.

"I read the other passages and appropriate sections from the Visitation of the Sick and asked her if she wished to receive the Blessed Sacrament. She didn't answer, but I offered it to her in the species of the precious blood—I carry the reserved Sacrament on my hospital rounds. I took a drop of the wine on my finger and touched her lips. Her tongue moved and received it in response. That was her last act in this world. I think she did not speak or gain consciousness while I stayed a few minutes more, and when a family member arrived—a young man—I left him alone with her. She died around then, I believe. I went to my car and read a commendatory prayer."

"What did this mean—her reaction?"

At this point in the conversation, Mrs. Schmidt returned with a laden tray and set it on a table. She poured coffee and white grape juice, and discreetly departed without a word.

"Let me read the Psalm, from the prayer book," Fr. Schmidt continued. "You tell me what you think."

> Thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I believed, and therefore

> will I speak; but I was sore troubled: I said in my haste, All men are liars. What reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits that he hath done unto me? I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows now in the presence of all his people: right dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Behold, O Lord, how that I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid; thou hast broken my bonds in sunder. I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call upon the Name of the Lord.

Schmidt looked up and said, "That's the essence of it, though I said daughter instead of son."

"This was the Psalm for the day?"

"One of the three for Morning Prayer."

"Did Beth receive the cup of salvation? Sounds like it to me."

"That's what I have hoped and prayed for. 'Right dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.' This was a precious death. Not that it was good she died, but that she died well. I've seen such deathbed conversions. Most more obvious, more clearly articulated. They're not uncommon, but not for those who calculated to live like hell, all the while believing they could repent later. Those people find that when the time comes, they can't repent—they resisted for so long that they lost the ability. But I have witnessed conversions of people who fled from their Creator their whole lives, only to give up running when they knew beyond doubt they couldn't win."

"Beth was a runner." Tears brimmed in Stan's eyes

"Yes, and aren't we all?"

Stan stood and held out his hand. "Thank you so much. This news may help a friend give up his own hell."

Fr. Schmidt hugged Stan.

"There's something I must say, Stan. I'm sorry for the sermon I preached the Sunday morning when she died. Truthfully, I was afraid to say anything that might be misunderstood. People want to simplify our words to use them against us. The fact is, I could neither condone such an act against an abortion clinic, nor could

I wholeheartedly condemn it, knowing what I knew about . . . about the girl. Instead, I said what was safe."

"You mean, what you said about the bomb threat being the same as murdering children?"

"Yes."

"What changed your mind?"

Schmidt nervously laughed. "I realized that if I was going to be judged, it would be for speaking truth. I *hoped* you would come see me afterwards, but you never did. I'm still cautious, you understand, but now I refuse to lie. Truth is essential for a pastor, unless, well, unless to save a life. The Hebrew midwives—they refused to drown the babies in Egypt. Rahab, she protected the Israelite spies. Facts are not always truth." Schmidt cleared his throat and blinked. "But, of course, the best path may be silence, and so we had better change the subject. Yes, let's drop that subject. Anyway, I'm so glad you came, Stan. Again, I'm sorry to hear about Mindy, and I pray for her safe return."

"Thank you. Isn't it strange how the bomb threat that hurt no one made national news, and the murders of Coral and . . . of Talus Schenk, and the abduction of my wife didn't?"

"Yes, it is."

Though it was a small matter compared with the present troubles, Stan left from Fr. Schmidt's home wondering who might have called in the bomb threat those years ago.

† † †

That evening, Stan read a story to Maxy and put him to bed, and he rocked Chrysanthe to sleep. Then he retired early, but woke up after midnight with an idea. He threw on a jacket and went outside. The night air was cool and damp as he walked the circuit of the field to the north. Energized now, he returned to his corner of the sprawling house and looked in at the children. They slept soundly. He put classical music on and turned it as loud as he dared. Using a hammer and pry bar, Stan carefully began pulling boards from the south wall of his apartment to expose the mosaic of colored glass that Sterne had said was there. He carried the boards downstairs and piled them outside. Without illumination from behind, it was impossible to tell what

the panes depicted. He found a tall ladder, turned on the lights, and tore down some of the heavy paper that had been covering the windows in the cathedral-like room that made the center of the house. He could not reach all the paper, and ragged pieces of it hung down. He turned off the lights. The task completed and it still being dark outside, he turned the music off upstairs and lay down on the couch. In an hour, he awoke. The harsh darkness of night had softened in the predawn. Stan made a cold cereal breakfast and the children began stirring. Stan took care of their needs, and afterwards they sat on the couch to read a Bible story before it was time for him to carry them up to the Bluff House for the day. A Saturday, he would work in the morning and join them for lunch and the remainder of the afternoon. After the Bible reading, the three sat quietly on the couch. In a few minutes, the sun rose over the trees, and a muted light swiftly glowed through the broad glass panels before them. The colors brightened and dazzled. Stan wondered about what he saw and, as the parts of the story fell into place, he feasted on the narrative unfolding right to left. The panes told of the prophet Samuel, from his calling by God as a child, to the anointing of David as King over Israel. The central and largest panel depicted Samuel setting up a stone after Israel defeated the Philistines in a great slaughter.

Stan jumped up, exclaiming through tears. He walked to the glass and felt the interstices. "Look children! Look. This tells about a boy who served God all his life. This story has been told in our house all along, and we didn't know it!"

† † †

As the departure for Salt Lake City neared, Stan felt a paralyzing dread. He had grown to hate traveling, not traveling so much as leaving, and even more did he hate to leave Chrysanthe and Maxwell. But they would sleep in Mindy's old bedroom at the Bluff House, would be well cared for by Sarah and Bennett, and would have the continual company of cousins, since the Uchidas decided to move to the Bluff House for the time being. Stan's supposed job interview was scheduled for Friday, which was the latest it could seem realistic, because classes began on Monday—it was at a school where a teacher had quit at the last

moment. If Stan left on a Tuesday morning, it would allow two driving days and a whole day of rest before Friday. Dr. Sterne had apologized for not allowing Stan to fly, saying that it would "add complications" like increased scrutiny invoked by a one-way ride, because, if Tommy left there with Stan, it certainly could not be on a commercial flight.

In the evening before his anticipated trip, Stan moved Maxwell and Chrysanthe to the Bluff House, taking the children's essential belongings and his luggage. He stayed in the room next to them. In the morning, Stan woke at 3:00 a.m., anxious and nauseous. He was supposed to be leaving at 10:00 a.m. after a farewell breakfast with the children, Sarah, and his parents, but when he felt weary enough to sleep again, he switched off his phone and posted a note on the door for Sarah saying that he was going to delay a day.

Putting off the dreadful departure relaxed him enough so he could sleep for several hours and he had an unusual dream. He was at a crowded coffeehouse with long impatient lines. To relieve the stress, he performed a magic trick for everyone—he climbed an unsupported rope. The people who watched were amazed. Someone asked him why he did not perform a serious miracle. Stan showed the skeptic a tall nearby Sycamore tree soaring up into the sky, and he said, "The tree was dead and rotted a few moments ago, and now it's alive and growing." The skeptic was not impressed.

When he awoke mid-morning, he felt refreshed enough to be objective about his fears and he spent the entire day playing with the children and reading them stories, and when they napped in the afternoon, he fell asleep beside them under a breezy window.

Hearing that Stan had not left yet, Dr. Sterne called him in the early evening and said, "You know, you don't have to go."

"But I believe that I do."

"You are staying with Maxwell and Chrysanthe again tonight at the Bluff House?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'd like to talk with you one last time before you go."

† † †

After the children were asleep, Dr. Sterne knocked at the door of Stan's room. "Let's walk," Sterne said.

They strolled trails of the Mollicoat Estate, carrying only one flashlight between them. Stan felt serene. After the previous night of anxiety, he now trusted that all things would be well.

"I won't keep you long," Sterne said. "I just wanted to tell you how we have made every effort to restore our nation by peaceful means. I'm telling you this, because it's time to give you more responsibility in our Assembly. I . . . I just realized this today when I thought you had already left. When you return, we'll talk more. As you may know, the president of the Government in Power claims that he values life. We challenged him to hold to his principles."

"Did . . . You wrote a letter?"

"Uh, no. We met with him."

"That's amazing, considering your recent . . . project."

"We didn't make an appointment. We detained him for thirty-two hours against his will."

"How—?" Stan was shocked speechless.

"It wasn't easy, in one respect, and yet it was relatively simple. We found him at his private home, and by stealth, we escorted him to a secure location."

"He's the most protected man in the world."

"Ironic, that—because he won't use his power to protect the most helpless, even when it's his duty . . . Security is relative. The GiP is weakening from within. As with Senator M, the president's friends helped us—his true friends. No one was hurt, except for the Secret Service agents that we were compelled to subdue. They will recover. Let's not dwell on the how of this business. We needed his full attention in order to advise him authoritatively. And to warn him about what could happen if he ignores our advice."

"I don't remember seeing any news about this."

"Officially, it was a routine visit to the hospital, and, secretly, the vice president had been given the presidency for two days."

"Won't they come looking for something like the Assembly?"

Sterne could not restrain a chuckle. "The GiP—those few members who learned about this—thought we were government officials in the president's own party."

Sterne removed a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket, unfolded the paper and handed it to Stan. "This is what we presented to him. It's an excerpt from a document which is our plan for restoring the true government. This part—a summary—only refers to abortion, which is the most abominable aspect of the GiP and our culture."

Stan began reading the paper, while Sterne waited.

> 1. Appoint federal judges who openly recognize that children before birth are persons under the law and, as such, are granted the full rights of personhood.
> 2. Lead the nation in a period of repentance for the slaughter of millions of children.
> 3. Under a Presidential Commission, begin an aggressive national educational campaign regarding:
> A. The dangers of abortion
> B. Help for women whose pregnancy makes them feel afraid
> C. The importance of chastity, and of bearing children within the security and commitment of marriage
> D. Fidelity and love within marriage
> 4. Once the Commission is moving, appear before the nation and declare a national moratorium on abortion. All free-standing abortion sites will be closed on the day following the declaration. Interim government panels will review the rare cases when a pregnant mother's life is endangered by continuance of the pregnancy.

"You really did this?" Stan asked finally.

Sterne nodded. "After ten hours of discussion, the president agreed to implement these points, and we returned him to his home. Agreement to this part of our manifesto and the timetable was a condition of his release, but apparently, we did not talk long enough, because he broke faith. We tried to convince him that it was possible to succeed without social dissolution, but—"

"He promised under duress."

"We gave him the encouragement and opportunity to become extraordinary, but he failed the challenge. The price is too high,

he thought. But the price will be paid, one way or another. And the nation will be paid *for* what it does, as well. There's a historical, providential economy—a nation eventually reaps what it sows. We tried to explain all of this to him."

"That's amazing. What's next?"

"Let's talk when you return. I . . . I wished to include you when I spoke with the president, but . . . you were under distress at the time."

+ + +

After a small glass of sherry before turning in at midnight, Stan slept well. Since there was no longer a buffer in the schedule, he left very early, driving a van recently purchased by the Chinook Assembly.

Dr. Sterne had seen that the van was prepared, and Stan was delighted to find a library of fresh music and new audio recordings of fiction and nonfiction, which he listened to during the two-day trip. Having boredom eliminated made it a pleasure when he did not listen to anything, and then his mind rested with satisfaction in the simple chores of driving and contemplating what passed before him. He tried not to think about Mindy.

He stayed in a motel in Idaho during the first night away and called Sarah, who reported on the children. Though it was past their bedtime, Stan was pleased that they were still awake, and he told them "I love you."

Maxy said, "Love you, Daddy," which brought a lump in Stan's throat.

+ + +

Like tall ships moving in stately majesty, high, fibrous-topped clouds soared over Salt Lake City. Poised to greet the clouds and rebuff them were the shores of nearby mountains in the east. To the west, the sky incandesced brightly, mirroring light from the great inland sea.

Stan emerged from the van, stretched, and looked around. The residents of the house where he was to stay apparently had been watching from their windows and came outside to greet him. An older couple, the man descended the stairs from the house to shake Stan's hand and the woman following gave him a hug.

Casey and Frances Briggs. A young man with short dark hair and a wearing a vest hung back on the porch. The couple urged him down and introduced him as their grandchild. He lived with them while attending college, they said. He carried Stan's luggage inside the small, two-story house to an upstairs room that Stan would have to himself, which Stan appreciated with mute relief. He would have preferred a nearby motel, but as it happened, the house was better in every way. The couple and the young man left him alone and made him feel as if the place was his own, yet they were willing to give company and conversation. He could join them at meal times when they were home, or they would bring food to him in his room, if he wished.

As far as Stan could tell, they were only friends of the Sterne family who were willing to help him while he looked for a job. They never asked him "business" questions, nor did he ask them any, but they were enthusiastic, talkative encyclopedias of local information, from the history of the city and Mormonism, to stories about famous visitors and personages, from the location of every specialty shop, to appealing descriptions of hiking trails and winter sports in the mountains. They showed him on a map the best route to the school where he was to have the interview. Stan found out that the man and woman both had been teachers like himself, and that the young man wished to attend seminary. Stan also learned, in the guise of neighborhood gossip and as an insignificant afterthought, that a nearby building in this quiet residential and light commercial community—a building not visible from their yard except for its back gate and driveway—was an abortion site.

The next day he slept in late, and after lunch drove northeast to the private school that rested at the feet of the Wasatch Mountains. There was nothing between the playgrounds of the school and the brushy green and brown land behind that sloped up to rocky peaks. This was a teacher prep day, and the school was cool, dark, and quiet inside. A pretty receptionist at the front desk greeted Stan with a cheering smile, said he was expected by the principal, Mr. Enoch, and asked him to wait in a chair. A minute passed and the receptionist received a ring. After she hung up, she said Stan could enter the principal's

office. He stepped into a darkened room and she closed the door behind him. Oddly, the lights were out and the curtains shut.

Stan said, "Mr. Enoch?"

There was no answer and Stan walked around the spacious room. Stan guessed that Mr. Enoch had stepped out a door opposite to the one he had entered and he took a chair by the large desk and waited. Five minutes passed, and another five minutes until Stan concluded that Enoch never intended to be at the interview, which was a sham anyway. Not wishing to expose the game, Stan decided to wait for as long as such an interview might last. He found a magazine that seemed to be interesting and tried to read in a corner where light leaked in, and at the end of forty-five minutes, he left the office the way he had come in. The girl was not at the desk, and Stan exited by the front door and returned to what would be home for the next week, or longer.

The elderly Briggs couple seldom stayed at the house in the daytime. They often ate breakfast out and did not return until late evening. Stan guessed, though he never found out for certain, that in their retirement they were full-time watchers of this abortion place, and that they considered him their substitute who freed them to take time off and get around and enjoy themselves. The grandson came and left without notice, said nothing, and made no noise. Stan welcomed the arrangement because he had a hazardous—and tedious—job to perform. He wanted to return home to Portland as soon as possible after a successful outcome, with little extra personal involvement.

Besides cooking occasionally and washing dishes, Stan had nothing to do but spend hours outdoors reading in the sunshine and walking in the neighborhood for exercise. His duty was to be natural and conspicuous. When he needed a break, Stan wandered around the house and yard. The window curtains were lacy white and the house and every shelf were full of wooden and ceramic knick-knacks. Likewise, the yard contained ornaments, and colored and variegated flower and herb beds that were tucked into every corner. As recreation, Stan pulled weeds. Every day, he made a few inquiries over the telephone into possible jobs at other schools in the region.

Police and military had limited visible presence in the neighborhood, but he guessed the abortion site was under fearsome surveillance. Stan felt, but could not see, that every person entering the "field"—that is, within a block of the building—was cataloged and tracked thereafter. Stan seldom went within direct sight of the building itself, but stayed in propinquity and acted as if he had nothing better to do than hang out like a street person, or someone who might identify with a fashionable alternative micro-culture. The first time he went out, he felt nervous, but afterwards it became easier until he almost forgot the danger.

Every night he called home to talk with the children, and every other night he read to Maxwell from one of his favorite storybooks using a speakerphone while the children were in bed.

One evening, Dr. Sterne called him on the telephone. The conversation at first was comprised of lighthearted news about family events. But Sterne grew serious when he said, "Stan, I received a call from an FBI agent today. His name is Williams, and he wants to talk to you about Beth Telford. Says that he wants to hear what you know about her death, if anything. I thought he might speak to you over the phone, but he wants to talk in person. I expect he'll be contacting you when you get back here."

Stan casually said, "Fine. I'll be happy to talk with him when I return to Portland."

Dr. Sterne immediately changed the subject, saying there was still no news about Mindy. Sterne elaborated about how Anselm had returned dejected from his "cruise," and Stan did his best to listen, but later he could not remember what Sterne said, so absorbed was he in thinking about the FBI's interest in Beth Telford. It had to be connected to Tommy. Sterne gave no clue, nor suggestion about how Stan should behave regarding the FBI agent. The conversation itself had been perfectly natural, though Sterne had never before called him on the phone during Stan's travels. It was, if nothing else, a warning. They could not discuss the matter on the telephone because of the wiretap possibility, but Stan could now be better prepared to respond during the FBI interview when he went back to Portland.

Even so, he was scared.

+ + +

It was the next Friday after a week of, by most appearances, idleness in the fresh air and hot sunlight. With his shirt off, Stan sat on the steps that led up to a vacant lot near the back entrance of the abortion building, steps leading no-place—the once extant building long ago having been razed. Only grass grew there now. This was his favorite spot and he was wrestling through another chapter of Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

An old, dark-faced woman Stan had seen once before passed by—she, short and wide in the hips and wearing thick-soled shoes, a gaudy green, blue, and pink dress draped over by a chain of beaded costume jewelry, and crowned by a pizza-pan sized straw hat and exaggerated lipstick. She walked bent, with a limp and a cane, and her legs were crooked about the ankles. Stan was by now bored, lonesome, and depressed, though physically he felt well and welcomed any diversion.

He closed his book and said as she passed, "How are you today, Ma'am?"

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"How are you today?"

The woman stopped and shook her head. "Umm hmm," she said, her voice beginning high and dropping on the second syllable to a precise note that expressed mock indignation. "What kind of question is that? You tell me. What's the sense of a question like that?" Her voice was rich, musical, and ironic, a voice that signified looking at a world of tragic experiences with wisdom and humor.

"I'm sorry. I was only being polite."

"Polite? What's that? What's polite? Here I am, a supernatural deity in a natural body that's decayed, dying, and stiff with arthritis, and my children are all dead and my spouse is dead, and you, another supernatural deity in the prime of your life, doing nothing, and we pass within a few feet of one another, and we are strangers, and you ask a question that would take an hour for a start, one that would take a book to write in whole, and you ask a question but you don't want an answer, only a polite short answer. That's not polite. Not what I call polite."

Stan did not rankle under the browbeating, because he could see that the woman was enjoying herself and talking to him as

she would to a son that she loved, if she had one. "What would *you* say is polite in our situation?" he asked her.

"You must invite a person to your home and present her tea and scones, and ask anything you want, as long as you're willing to hear the answer, if it takes a year. You haven't asked me, but I'll ask you. Would you come to my house for tea?"

"Where do you live?"

"A long way off. A long way. I ride the bus."

"I don't think I can get away. You see, I'm waiting for someone."

"You are? Who could that be? A sweetheart? You've been waiting a long while. I've seen you here before, in this neighborhood."

Stan laughed and suddenly grew somber. "Not a sweetheart, only a friend. My wife was kidnapped almost a month ago, by some bad people in Washington State."

"Is that so? I'm truly sad for you. Then you're looking for your wife here in this city?"

"No. A friend."

"Ummm," she said, shaking her head slowly. "We do have things to talk about. You won't come with me to tea, or, I'll make you a lunch? I put a ripe muskmelon in the refrigerator this morning, and I can't eat it by myself."

"No, I'm sorry, but thank you. Why don't you come to the house where I'm staying? It's a block from here, less than a block, really. There, you can see it," he said, pointing. "The white one with flower beds, five houses away. Come this afternoon at 4:00."

"I can't later. Who knows, I mightn't be alive this afternoon, but I'd love tea now, if I may."

Stan was reluctant to leave his post, but under the social obligation, he put his shirt on and walked her to the house. The old woman could barely climb the steps to the kitchen door. She sank at the table with a tiny grunt and carefully propped her cane against the wall beside her. The curtains muted the sunbeams that shone in and reflected from the table's surface. Stan worked at the counter putting on water, opening tea bags and a cookie package and preparing cups.

"A little cream and no sugar," the woman behind him said.

"I hope Lady Grey tea is okay," Stan said.

Next, he heard his name in a strange growling voice. It couldn't be his name; it had to be a truck rumbling by, a radio, a hallucination, an epileptic seizure, or had he fallen asleep for a moment and dreamed? Stan wheeled around. No, it was the old woman, because she said it again, and she was no longer hunched, but lissome, leaning back in the chair in an oddly familiar way.

"Stanley Timmons, I am Tommy."

It was his voice.

It is a cliché in movies that when someone is startled, they drop whatever they are holding. If Stan had been holding the teapot, he would have dropped it, because when it seemed that Tommy's demon had possessed this poor woman, and when the woman transfigured herself before him into a man in costume—this, his friend whom he had been seeking, and who had killed dozens of people in cold blood—when all of this jolted through his brain, Stan's lungs exhaled a loud, inarticulate exclamation that sounded like "HUH!" and his hands flew up into the air. He fell back onto the counter, slipped to the floor bottom-first, and then he struggled up, staggered to a chair and sat down hard, holding his chest while he tried to slow his breathing.

The old woman/Tommy smiled at first during these antics, then frowned and said, "Don't be afraid." And when Stan still could not speak, he said, "In the theater, we call that 'chewing the scenery.'"

As Stan's physiology normalized, he took in the figure that sat in front of him at the table.

What Stan now beheld appeared more like a grotesque monster than it did either his friend, Tommy, or the dusky, painted woman he had been entertaining a moment ago. He could now recognize Tommy underneath the makeup, body padding, and women's clothing, but what features and characteristics of Tommy that had been familiar seemed changed. Stan thought that one part of the Tommy he knew had swelled and dominated the other. Like a brain tumor, the embracing of death pushed aside Tommy's real mind. Tommy's eyes did not see entirely what Stan's saw. They ignored movements to the periphery and stared at nothing at all. They did not blink when Stan's blinked.

They would not cry or laugh when Stan's would cry or laugh, though Stan hoped that it was not yet completely so. Tommy was hardened. He held a phone in his hand.

"Tommy!" Stan said at last. "I've been looking for you."

"Yes, I'm Tommy. Though folks call me Octopus. Not aesthetic, but accurate."

"Is there a better name?"

"No. But . . . perhaps Tehlirian . . . an Armenian. I don't care. I'm famous. A master of camouflage."

"Tommy. What have you been doing?"

"I've been on a crusade. Re-conquering the Holy Land. Beating back the infidels."

"Do you mean that?"

"Not altogether. I'm being facetious, *aren't* I? For you to ask means that you couldn't understand. Isn't it clear that I've been dispensing justice to depraved murderers?"

Stan had to be cautious because he did not want to provoke Tommy into violence against him. "Yes, they're depraved. They deserve to die. Don't we all?"

"True. I don't try to justify myself. I don't hold any illusions. I am sick, but no more than the average person. And I'm alone too much. My mind wanders when I don't have work. But when I'm hunting, I'm entirely focused. Concentrated. I have a purpose. These men and women that I have removed, they're murderers of innocent children, whose blood cries out from the ground. I have stopped these evil people from killing and I've spared them from committing more sins." Tommy glanced to the cookstove. "How about that tea and some cookies?"

Stan remembered the hot water, which was beginning to whistle from the kettle; he poured it into cups and brought Tommy's to the table. Heat off, kettle on a cool burner. He placed the package of cookies in the middle of the table. Still thunderstruck, he leaned against the counter next to the stove with his tea. "Is it really you?"

"Yes. I mean, no."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Why not?"

"How, how do you feel when you pull the trigger? Doesn't it bother you?"

Tommy smiled in the makeup, and in an instant resumed the character of the old woman and said in her voice, like she might have spoken to a class of children in Sunday School, "How do you think the shepherd boy David felt when he killed the arrogant giant Goliath?"

Stan muttered, "He felt relieved."

Tommy countered in his own voice. "He was joyful! I've read David's songs, and I comprehend them. 'The righteous shall rejoice that he has seen vengeance done and shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.'"

"Are you joyful?"

"Mostly I'm not. I'm nervous and tremble sometimes. Despondent. My arms tingle with numbness. When there's nothing to do, I sit in my rooms for hours. But I'm driven. I have a purpose, and I eat and drink, and cherish my body so that I can keep moving. I rest and exercise. I have an audience, and whatever the quotes in the press might say to the contrary—don't they have to make such disclaimers for PR purposes?—they love me. They cheer and applaud secretly. Many do. Society must cry outrage for the sake of propriety, but people are entertained. They love blood and violence, or they love justice. I must fulfill my purpose, you know, no matter how I feel, and when I kill the murderers, the tension and depression go away. Killing them gives me peace, and relieves the burden."

"You are hated too, and hunted."

Tommy had not shown anger until now, and Stan instantly regretted his statement when Tommy jerked to his feet, knocking the chair back to the floor. He aimed his telephone toward Stan as if it were not a phone and there was a dim flash.

"Are *you* hunting me?" Tommy said with passionate fierceness. "Answer me? How did you happen to be here? This is no accident."

"What, what are you holding?" Stan asked. He smelled burnt metal and plastic.

"A weapon. I could burn a hole through your heart." Tommy glanced behind Stan and nodded. "Your teapot."

Stan turned to the stove and saw that the kettle had a half inch hole in the middle of it, as did the control console of the stove behind the kettle. He closed his eyes, swallowed, and spoke,

desperately trying to slow down his pulsing heart and panting lungs. "Come with me, Tommy, and I'll help you."

Tommy had uncannily mastered his emotion and said calmly, "No. I don't need help. Not the way you mean." He lowered his hand that held the weapon, resumed his chair, placed the device on the table, and took a sip of tea. "You see, I use emotion as a tool. It doesn't control me. I wasn't really angry just now. My telephone? It passes through metal detectors and looks innocent in an x-ray or if I'm ever searched." He paused, then said, "Don't think about calling the police."

Stan did not know what further to say, and noticing this, Tommy continued.

"If I seem unbalanced, it's because of my isolation—my disconnection—from society. It's hard to be a sane person in an insane world. Someday, if the world ever reclaims its sanity, I'll be a hero."

"That may be."

Tommy began talking freely and Stan saw more of the person he once knew. "Remember," Tommy said, "how—you told me this yourself, because of your uncle who served in Vietnam—remember how so many soldiers who came back from Vietnam suffered mental problems because they didn't receive social approval? They were not supported psychologically, and this dragged them down. They filled the VA hospitals and homeless shelters. They wandered from city to city. While with the Second World War, it was different? The whole nation supported the war. We saved civilization. The men came home, had babies, built houses, and started businesses. It was boom time. Your car . . ."

"Yeah, though WWII soldiers had problems, too," Stan said. "They bottled up their nightmares and did not talk about them. They suffered, too, despite the just cause. Though it was a just war, not all of the actions committed were just. Whenever their guard let down, they remembered the horrors they performed and witnessed. Innocent people died, too, and children—they were bombed and caught in the crossfire."

"The innocent people are victims of those who made the violence—the war—necessary. By their murderous aggression."

"I . . . I never . . . thought of that before." Stan seemed momentarily lost in thought.

"I've been careful."

"You have?"

"Some targets were college students—the parking lot attendants. Hitler youth, I call them. They've been brainwashed, like I was once, to unregard children in the womb. Fetuses are subhuman, nonpersons to them. But that doesn't make the attendants' actions harmless. They're part of the killing machine. The same with the vendors who bring bottled water, who repair heating and cooling equipment, who deliver mail and packages, who bring oxygen, birth control pills—anybody who services the murderers. When the allies bombed Germany, they attacked munitions manufacturing and industrial sites." Tommy paused and then trained his steely eyes on Stan. "What's wrong with what I'm doing? You tell me."

"Private citizens aren't authorized to engage in war."

"Bullshit! Your doctrine omits reality."

"I hold a biblical view."

"Okay. I understand this, but . . . okay. But *bullshit!"* Tommy had nearly shouted that last word. "What about underground fighters in their invaded homeland? What about farmers and school boys who kill the enemy but who are not in the army?"

"The partisans would be commissioned by their government."

"Not all of them. Okay, okay, just say that this was the case, but in this situation, it's the government that's the enemy. The government allows—no, it serves and protects—the killing of the innocent. From whom am I to receive my commission? Were those men and women in Europe who picked up whatever weapons they could find, and sabotaged Nazi endeavors or ambushed governmental collaborators and picked off Nazis in the night—was this wrong because they didn't receive a commission? It's ludicrous. Pure bullshit. Private citizens have a duty, a moral duty to protect their neighbors."

"There's a difference between us and Nazi Germany," Stan said. "Hitler suspended the democratic process. Here, we can change our government and laws by voting."

"Really? Could we really? You are so stupid. So, what if the Germans all voted to murder the Jews of Europe? Or their judges voted it in? Or their elected officials voted for the Holocaust? Then it all would have been legal, right? You would wait for the next election to try to save your neighbors, right? No, it's *never* legal to intentionally slaughter innocent people."

Stan's disbelief in his surroundings momentarily asserted itself. This scene was bizarre to laughable. A philosophical duel between himself and his old acquaintance, an actor-become-assassin, in a house in a neighborhood teeming with hidden government agents looking for Tommy, but the agents having no clue that he was under their noses. Stan had nearly exhausted his arguments. His spirit was disintegrating into hopelessness about rescuing Tommy from the path of death.

But Tommy was not finished. "Answer this. Would you use force, lethal force, to defend the life of your child? Would you?"

"I might."

"There! Then why wouldn't you use lethal force for your neighbor's child? Doesn't the Bible say to love your neighbor as yourself? The reason you won't is you're a coward. You're inconsistent. You, my friend, have a special category for children in the womb, and your rules are different for them than for other people. You don't really believe they are persons, because you don't treat them the same as other persons. This makes you 'pro-choice,' doesn't it? Why don't you join me and really be pro-life? The Bible says that he who sheds the blood of man shall by man have his blood shed. God values human life so much that a person who kills innocent people must be sacrificed to uphold that value. I'm stopping the killers and saving the lives of children. I am bringing God's judgment to these murderers. Listen, I've been acting alone for a long while, but now I'm branching out. I have already begun." Tommy reached across the table and took Stan by the arm. "Why don't you come with me?"

Stan did not pull back his arm. "There's a certain reasonableness to what you say, Tommy. Much in history that we consider honorable has been conducted with your explanations and motives. I don't have a good argument right now. But . . . I can't join you. Maybe I *am* a coward."

"No, you aren't. I shouldn't have said it. You're only confused. Many people are."

"But I'm not a killer."

"I wasn't either. If I can kill, anyone can. I'm like some abortion doctors—idealistic, hardworking people who borrow money to get through medical school—except they kill the innocent. Have you ever seen actual video of a child being aborted? It's worse than the worst still photos. These bloody images are my fuel, and I imagine that they are pictures of my own child. Killing is hard at first, because these are real people. It's sad, but it gets easier. It's my business."

"Should it get easier? I'm not sure . . . But there are things you don't realize about me, Tommy. How do you think I found you here? You said that you want to expand your efforts, but don't you know that the FBI is closing in on you? That they're watching this place? For all I know, there are agents everywhere around us. This is a trap—that's why I came to find you. If we leave now, we might get away, and I have people who can protect and help you. I know I shouldn't say this, but there are people who are working covertly to bring an end to the killing of preborn children and a reform of our government. Remember Mark Ponder? He didn't run to Canada, as the papers reported. He's in prison now in another country. He was put on trial and given a death sentence, which hasn't been carried out yet."

While Stan had begun these words, Tommy first slunk down like a persecuted animal and he craned his neck to glance out the window. At hearing about Ponder, he started violently with a sharp intake of breath, as if he would strangle Ponder if he could reach his throat.

"What about it?" Stan asked urgently.

"Ponder in custody? Really? I'd like to pay him a visit and apply the sentence."

"Oh, forget about that, will you? What's important is leaving soon. I might be able to arrange for you to visit Ponder. It won't be like what you're thinking, though."

Tommy sat back in his chair and seemed to relax. He took a sip of tea, swished it in his mouth, and set the cup on the table.

"Putting pretense aside, Stan. No baloney. It is time for the real truth. I know that you are a member of a secret organization

that's plotting to overthrow the government. Actually, Stan—this will be a shock—I've been hired by the federal government to massacre abortionists for the purpose of stirring up the populace and generating enmity against antigovernment radicals, and uh, building demand for increased security to combat these conspiratorial groups. Through this work, I've been contacting people who long to unite with me, and I turn them over to the government for prosecution. I, Stanley, have been bait. You thought this setup was a trap for me, but you've been fooled. The trap is for *you*. I had no idea that you would be involved in something like this and I'm shocked. For friendship's sake, I've decided to warn you. That's why I can't come with you. It's you who should get away as soon as possible and leave this dangerous occupation. Or if you joined me, we could both work for the government and shut down your seditious organization. We need people like you."

Stan was frightened out of his wits and did not know what to say. This revelation was staggering. The government was more wicked than he imagined. He went pale and he felt sick. He knew there were risks, but he thought all along that he had been undercover and protected, and now it seemed that he was naked. The complexity of the situation was more than he could handle and he despaired of finding any way to untangle the morass.

Tommy, who had been studying Stan's face, began laughing and slapped his knee. "It's a lie. All that I just said is a lie. Couldn't you tell? I'm joking!" His laughter ceased suddenly.

Stan held back his anger and resentment at being manipulated. If anything, after enduring this emotional reversal, he became calmer and more resolved to pull his friend from his devils, and to not be fooled again. He was now alert and on guard, like a fencer ready to counter every attack, subtle or overt, to take advantage of any weakness. He crouched mentally and waited for Tommy's next move. Tommy wasn't leaving yet, so there was hope, and Stan had one more stroke in him, a move that Tommy could not anticipate.

Tommy seemed to latch onto a new idea. "Uh, what about this girl of yours? Her name was Mindy, and I introduced you, as I recall. Beth and I introduced you." He appeared to wander into a momentary memory about those different, delightful, relatively

innocent days, and slowly he drifted back into the reality at hand and muttered, "Those tiresome reruns. What was I saying? Yes. You said that your girl was kidnapped. Tell me about it."

As Stan related the story, Tommy nodded more and more vigorously and then, as Stan concluded, Tommy erupted. "I can help you find her! I know these brigand types. We'll hunt them down, cut their throats, and chop off their reproductive organs. We'll slice their bodies into pieces and leave them in blue recycling bags outside their parents' houses! We'll leave their dicks hanging on the doorknobs. We'll erase their names from the world. Don't you want to find those who took her? I can help *you* do this. We'll be partners."

During this brief speech, Tommy had rapidly worked through a tempest of changing emotions. Tears had rolled down his cheeks—mascara-stained tears—and spittle flew from his mouth. When the burst of frenzy ended, Tommy paused, and then his angry tears became those of a normal grieving man, of one who has eluded healing. As with a storm that blows wind, pours rain, rumbles thunder, flashes lightning, and dwindles to a gentle rain, Tommy grew calm. What he said next disturbed Stan more than ever, because he concluded tranquilly, in a near whisper, "Stan, Beth accompanies me on my missions. She encourages me. Soldiers kill and die for their country. I'm killing for my girl. Is that any less noble a cause? If I stop aborting abortion doctors, what shall I do?"

There was a long period of silence. Stan waited for the awkwardness to pass.

Tommy seemed to feel a need to explain himself more. He stared at the teacup in his hand and spoke softly. "I am what I am, and nobody's opinion will change me. It doesn't mean that I like shooting people. Doesn't mean that others should follow my example. I am alone. When this is over, I might be condemned, forever."

"Do you know that I have a nephew that I love very much? His name is Guthrie and I'm so glad that he was born. Talus Schenk . . . Talus Schenk was his father." Stan was afraid to accuse Tommy of murdering Schenk.

Tommy put down the cup, moved his gaze toward his hands and said nothing.

"Tommy. I came here to tell you about Beth."

Through the makeup, Tommy gave Stan a skeptical frown, and said coldly, "I've not seen her, you know. It's a fantasy. You know that. You couldn't have seen her, either. She's dead. The crazy outburst you saw a minute ago? It was an act. My technique is to keep madness—the same that everyone has—on a short leash until it's needed." Tommy seemed to brighten. "Remember when I played in *Macbeth*?" He then breathed in through his nose, let it out in a soft whisper. "Oh, never mind."

Stan saw the chance he had been waiting for. "I haven't seen Beth, but I know what happened with her when she died."

Tommy stared at the floor unblinkingly and waited.

Stan gave him a handwritten copy of the Psalm that Fr. Schmidt believed was Beth's last testament, and then he told Tommy the story that Schmidt had related. He spoke soothingly, pleadingly. "I don't believe that Beth would want you to live this way. Why didn't you come to the funeral, Tommy? We could have worked on this together and tried to understand." It was Stan's turn to express emotion, but he kept it subdued. "I tried to find you. I came by your house. I left messages. Come with me, Tommy! Come with me and we'll leave tonight—as soon as possible, right now. Or we can meet you somewhere—a safe place. My father-in-law, he's a doctor and he's helped so many people. Remember Sarah, my sister? She was in a psych hospital and he helped her. Is there anything in you, Tommy, that can trust? Can you trust anyone? Will you trust me? Let's not play games, okay?"

Tommy was reading the Psalm, his lips mouthing the words.

Stricken, he now melted into soft tears, not of anger, nor of hatred or bitterness, but honest, childlike tears. All his defenses had at least been temporarily dissolved, and yet he could not bring himself to a decision. "I *was* at the funeral . . . she . . . she . . . she was the only thing, the only person I ever loved, really loved. So sad . . . I need . . . to think about this. If I come back tomorrow, I'll leave with you. If I come back."

Abruptly, Tommy was gone and the old woman returned. She pulled a compact mirror and a handkerchief from her purse to wipe her smudged mascara and touch up her lipstick. She delicately powdered her face. With wheezing and obvious pain,

she rose to her feet. She sounded the same as when Stan met her, but knowing the truth, he could hear Tommy, as a person hears a man's voice in the recording made when the man was a boy. "Thank you for the tea, young man," the woman said. "I am impressed. You're the politest person I ever have met. My heart is warmed that there are young people like you in the world. I must go now. I hope for the best for you and your children. Get yourself another wife, hon. It's not good for a man to be alone. Maybe we shall meet again someday."

"Don't go, Tommy."

"I have a doctor's appointment, dear. My swollen ankles. Maybe I'll return tomorrow."

"Goodbye, Tommy. Come back tomorrow."

"Goodbye. Goodbye. God be with ye."

"I know what it's like to lose my lover, Tommy."

The old woman took her cane, passed through the door, and hobbled down the stairs and away along the sidewalk. Stan had followed her to the edge of the yard and watched until she was out of sight, and then he carefully glanced all around at the darkened windows of the neighboring houses and buildings. He had a strong feeling that behind one of those glass panes, someone had been watching—and noticing—every movement she and he had been making.

Windows overlooking the street.

The story of **UNIVERSAL MAN** begins with:

Part One, ***Graceful Runner***

and ends with Part Three, ***Then a Soldier***

From under the awning at 62 Orange Street in Asheville, North Carolina soon after it closed as an abortion business.

Hunt in Berea, KY. 1977.
PHOTO BY THEP